Rapturous Rhapsody

ReadingDangerously

FOREWORD

Welcome to Rapturous Rhapsody!
R&R for short. A story I am writing in my downtime as a way to unwind.
It should be obvious things are a bit different here. It's Waifu Catalogue with a twist. Hints will appear in future chapters, but an exact explanation will not come for some time. For that same reason, I will not be posting the build as it has spoilers. I will be posting it after that will no longer be the case. I will be taking liberties with 'canon', so it would be best to leave now if that offends you. It is only going to get worse.

What is this?:

-A waifu catalogue story.
*-Wish fulfilment couched in a way to tell a decent story. *side-eyes Webnovel*, Unlike some others.*
-An attempt to get better at writing, to be specific at writing different characters.What is this not?:

What is this not?:

-A smut story. I plan on having some smexy times in the future so its staying in NSFW, but I prefer my characters to have some depth and a relationship rather than be two cardboard cuts out.
-A collect-them-all Harem story. I'm going to struggle as is with the 10 already. More might be possible, but not too many. I want everyone to get screentime and development.
-A jump chain or multi-world travel story.

The prologue will see hints of it, but I have plans to stick to one world after this part. It will not be a 'canon' world.

SYNOPSIS

Would you take the Deal? Live your wildest fantasies at the cost of orchestrating the most significant prison break ever conceived? Spanning six worlds, millions of years, and more violence than you can shake a stick at. Everyone wants Freedom. Everyone. So… Sign here. No hard feelings. Just Company Policy. (WC/Soulsborne/Superheroes, shaken not stirred, with a twist of madness).

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Volume 1

Confinement

CONFINEMENT I

I felt an angel near today, though one I could not see
I felt an angel oh so close, sent to comfort me

Wakefulness did not come quickly to Robin. It was slow, rough, and entirely disorienting, like crawling through mud. That she was waking up at all was certainly a surprise. In her life, she had learned surprises were ever so rarely good. Employing one of the techniques that had saved her life on many occasions, she lay there with her eyes closed, not moving an inch. Using her Haki to make sure nobody was nearby, she reached out with her Devil Fruit powers. She instantly conjured an eye on one of the walls to get a lay of the room before dissipating it and reconjuring it in the ceiling corner. In her experience, people very rarely looked up.

Robin got a good look around where she lay with her hidden eye. The room was luxurious, probably the best in which she had ever slept, which was saying something. The bed was large, and the sheets were silken smooth. Robin only realized now that she was entirely naked under the covers, which was distressing. The rest of the room was well furnished; a few cushioned chairs sat in the corner next to a small table. A lounge sofa lay near the foot of the bed. In front of which was a thick carpet, and against the wall was a fireplace made of brick. The fire was lit but only burned softly with only a few logs on the grate. Curiously, there were no ashes under the burning wood.

The flames were the only source of illumination in the room though she noted a few lamps on the bedside tables and a chandelier high up in the tall ceiling. A few windows along the wall were covered in heavy, purple drapes. The walls were covered in bookshelves with only space for the fireplace and three doors. One of which was a sliding door beyond which Robin imagined lay a closet. Everything was made out of dark wood, black velvet, and inlay with subtle touches of ivory.

Whoever had taken her, rescued her, was wealthy. Very wealthy. So what were their plans for her, and where were the rest of her crew? It was not paranoia if people really were out to get you.

She wasn't wearing seastone, at least for the moment, so they either remained ignorant of who she was or didn't intend her harm. For the moment.

Dissipating her eye on the ceiling, Robin slowly and carefully made her way out from under the covers. The room was warm due to the fire, so her nudity was not uncomfortable, but she would prefer to find clothes sooner than later. Keeping a wary eye

on either of the doors, Robin made her way towards what she suspected to be the closet.

Sliding it open, Robin realized she was both right and wrong with her guess.

To call it a closet was to call a skiff a battleship.

From hangers that stretched on for yards were clothes of all styles and colours, and racks of shoes and boots covered one side of the wall. Accessories such as hats, belts, and other paraphernalia filled a shelf on the side beside a massive floor-length mirror. Most disconcerting was that all of it, from the hats, boots, and garments, were in the pirate's preferred style and made out of high-quality material.

Whoever this room belonged to had gone out of their way to ensure it was to her taste.

Some frightening implications came to mind. How long had Robin been unconscious? How long must they have been following her? To remain safe, Robin dressed in clothes that were easy to move in and could function in any weather. She took a hat and sunglasses in case she needed to make a getaway.

As she was getting dressed, Robin started to hear voices coming from beyond one of the doors. Though she could not hear their exact words through the solid wood door, the voices sounded feminine and hurried.

Proceeding slowly, Robin went to the opposite door, cracked it a bit to peek inside, and saw a luxurious bathroom. Closing the door, she made her way to the other entrance and fully opened it.

What lay beyond wasn't in the same style as the room Robin had woken up in. While the floors were still made of wood, they were of a lighter colour, the walls were covered in art rather than bookshelves, and it was lit by bulbs on the wall rather than firelight. The images on the walls depicted various things, though natural landscapes and religious figures seemed to be the most common.

Other doors dotted the walls, though all seemed to be in different styles. Some looked personalized, while others remained blank. The pirate counted three doors on each wall, including the one Robin had just stepped out of. The hall looked to only have one main exit near her own entrance, the other ending in a window overlooking a cliff and the sea. Judging by the light filtering in through it, it was early morning. She decided the windows in her room or in this hall would be a good exit in case of emergency. Better than risk delving deeper into the house. With the speed of a woman who's been on the run her entire life, Robin took it in with a quick glance.

After that quick moment, Robin turned her attention to the other hall occupants. Like the hall, she quickly categorized the women she could see, assessing them as possible threats. Of course, she didn't fail to maintain a demure smile on her face as she did so.

They were three women in the hall. Opposite her was a dark-skinned woman in an orange shirt and tight black pants. Long purple hair in a ponytail and yellow eyes. She was tiny by comparison to Robin's tall frame, easily a foot shorter. She leaned against the door opposite the pirate but judging by her tense muscles and wary eyes, she was ready to spring into action at any moment. The other two women were further down near the end and talking by the window.

The first was covered entirely in a dark cloak; her entire body was hidden and her proportions unknown. The only way Robin could even be sure the figure was the occasional fluttering pressed the cloth against some generous curves. Nonetheless, the Straw Hat remained wary since the cloaked woman was hovering in the air. While not super rare, any Devil Fruit that allowed its user to fly was dangerous. Her companion wasn't hidden in the least, however. She was only a few inches shorter than Robin, with tan skin, black hair and blue eyes. She was also wearing an armoured corset that left the top of her generous breasts exposed, greaves, wrist guards and a crown. Her impressive musculature and the weapons on her hip put her as another possible threat. Robin concluded that all three women could be dangerous in different ways.

All eyes flickered to Robin as she stepped into the hall. There was a brief pause as everyone sized each other up. The moment was broken when another one of the doorways opened up, and someone else joined the gathering group.

"What exactly is going on here?" The new arrival was an auburn-haired woman in some sort of leotard. Her eyes were deep crimson, and her long hair was covered in a bejewelled veil. Her eyes flickered over the other women in the same manner as Robin before they settled on the armoured brunette.

"That," The armoured brunette answered. "Is an excellent question. Is anyone here aware of where we might be located? Neither myself nor Raven are familiar with this building. We also do not remember arriving here." She asked, gesturing to her cloaked companion and surveying the growing group.

"If I had known, I would not have asked," The spandex woman said.

"The others might know," the cloaked woman, Raven, spoke up in a monotone voice. As her armoured companion looked at her companion in question, she continued. "There are five more women down that way." She pointed a gray-skinned finger down past Robin.

Robin subtly opened and closed hidden eyes without indicating her actions in rapid succession. She followed the path down the long hall, which opened into a grand foyer. It seemed like they were in the left corridor of a large mansion. Robin assumed they were on the second floor based on the double stairs going down and up and the great glass wall and doors below. Aside from the two sets of stairs, double doors were in the center

between both halls. All this she observed and noted in a few blinks of an eye.

As Robin opened an eye in the ceiling of the opposite corridor, she observed that, like Raven said, there were five more women in this side hall. Four blondes and another cloaked figure. She couldn't make out too much of their profiles from her position, but they all appeared to be more than blessed in the looks department, with some of the largest busts she had ever seen. She took what information she could gleam in a moment.

Light purple cloak, pointed ears, withdrawn in the corner.

Blonde shoulder-length hair, silver corset and thigh highs.

Blonde hair in a bun, white and black blouse, small cape, whip. Talking with 'Corset Blonde'.

Blonde hair in pigtails, green shirt, massive rack. Holding her head in apparent pain.

Blonde hair in a bun with bangs, silver armour, white-furred cloak. Luminescent green eyes staring right at Robin!

Robin tensed and dismissed the eye on reflex. That woman had been sharp. Even the most proficient Haki users hadn't been able to notice her spying. She braced herself to use her Devil Fruit if the need came. Shaking her head, Robin changed her train of thought.

Of more importance was finding getting as much information as possible. The rest of the women in the hall seem to be no more well-informed than Robin was.

That did not paint a pretty picture.

A group of beautiful women. All were displaced with no idea what was going on. Who appeared in an area that clearly belonged to wealthy individuals? This was setting off alarms in her head. The lack of a collar around their necks and the fact that they had placed no seastone on her stopped the worst of the panic. She still had options.

"I shall ask," the armoured brunette said to her companion. She started to make her way towards the second-floor landing and the other hall. "I am Diana of Themyscira, and this is Raven." The pair walked past Robin and her shorter opposite. The veiled woman followed the pair by a few feet. The pirate pretended to do the same but started down the stairs rather than the other corridor. She would not find answers there.

"Scathach," she heard the veiled woman say as she stepped away.

Beyond was a terrace connecting to a curving staircase leading to a big entrance like Robin had seen. Everything remained in the same style as the hall, there were no gaudy displays, and most of the wealth seemed to be implied rather than overt. That actually went a long way to soothing Robin's fears. In her experience, those with wealth and power tended to flaunt it. Those who maintained subtle expressions of power tended to be the more competent, for better or worse. They also tended to be less prone to casual cruelty.

As she started to make her way down the stairs, Robin felt a weight settle onto her

shoulder. She saw a black cat staring up at her with its golden eyes from its perch.

"Hello there," it said in a deep voice. It sounded male, but judging from the fact that it came from the hallway behind her, it was probably female. Another Devil Fruit user, then. By process of elimination, she was the shorter woman in orange from the room opposite her own.

"Hello," Robin answered as she proceeded down the stairs.

"You got a name?" The cat asked.

Interesting. While Robin was in no way vain, the Straw Hat Pirates were rather well renowned, and she was one of the more infamous ones of the group. For a Devil Fruit user to not know her name suggested isolation or willful ignorance. Nonetheless, while she was undoubtedly paranoid, she was not rude.

"Sunday. And you are?" The cat snorted in amusement

"I know a fake name when I hear one, and that is as fake as they come. But I guess you can keep your secrets. Name's Yoruichi. Ya' got any idea about what's going on?"

"I am as ignorant as you on the subject," Robin shrugged. "What is the last thing you remember?" She asked, fishing for information. The way Yoruichi eyed her made her realize the cat knew what she was doing and didn't care.

"Having my heart ripped out, how about you?" The cat deadpanned.

"That lines up with my experience, yes." Yoruichi, which he squinted up at her.

"So, some sort of extra afterlife? Separate from Soul Society and Hueco Mundo?" Robin didn't know what those two places were, but it was easy to guess from context. Nevertheless, she was not one to advertise her ignorance.

"Possibly," Robin answered as she reached the foyer entrance and pushed open the large double doors. "Though I'm expecting something a little more strange."

Beyond the doors lay paradise. That was the only way to put it.

The building was set atop a small mountain that overlooked an island. A path of well-paying stones ran from the doors, about a 15-minute walk if Robin was the judge, down to a large field. On either side of the path were orchards of fruit-bearing trees. As she looked to the right and left, she noticed that the orchard eventually ended, and forests covered the other parts of the island. The island was massive. She couldn't see its end, with snow-capped mountains towering in the distance blocking further viewing.

The weather was warm without being too hot. The sea sparkled blues and greens under the early morning sunrise. From what Robin could tell, the building wrapped around the hill like a crown, made of oaks and other woods. She could see large windows and terraces, giving it an open-air feel. It was on a towering cliff that faced southwards, below which lay a sandy beach. All in all, it looked like a summer island paradise if it

were not for the fact that a few kilometres from shore, the sea disappeared into a yawning black void.

“Right,” the cat drawled, “something strange.”

The following hour was spent exploring the building where the various women found themselves. It was a somewhat sprawling mansion, with everything a group would need to survive independent of the world and then some more on top of it. There was a large training yard to the side of the building filled with a shed of weapons and armour. A greenhouse grew various plants, most of which Robin or Yoruichi could not identify. The back of the building was wrapped by a rather lovely deck which contained a hot tub and a pool that looked rather inviting. That part hung over the cliff edge, and the glass floor produced a feeling of vertigo that made Robin a bit queazy.

The inside of the building was perhaps even more luxurious, though it maintained its subtle style. The first floor was primarily rooms dedicated to utilities. The kitchen was large enough to house 10 people and the dining room thrice that amount. There was a large sitting room which contained a fireplace much like the one in Robins, with plush couches and various seating arrangements. Another room was a dedicated library filled with books of all sorts, and in languages Robin couldn’t even recognize. Yoruichi practically had to drag her from the room. On the second floor were bedrooms, the double doors the pirate noticed earlier leading to an absolutely lavish master suite. The third floor was actually the roof. A bit of greenery was interspersed around various terraces seating arrangements and even another pool. It all seemed designed to maximize the enjoyment of the spectacular view.

As they explored, the pair kept engaging in their little game, dare she say it, cat and mouse. They kept trying to weed out secrets from the other.

Robin learned that Yoruichi was indeed female. She enjoyed teasing others, was extremely politically savvy, had just been in a major war, and had no idea what a Devil Fruit was. What Yoruichi learned the straw hat could only guess, though there were moments where the cat looked so smug Robin could tell right away that she had discovered something. The pair had seen more of the women as they explored, but they felt no need to engage them in conversation. Everybody was exploring, some of them in pairs, but most by themselves. The team noticed the cloaked woman from the other hall fly off the mansion’s roof and into the forest.

After over an hour of exploration, they were starting to get a bit hungry, so the pair made their way to the fully stocked kitchen. They were not the only ones with that idea, as it seemed one of the blondes from the other hall had decided food was a good idea. It was the very busty one in green. She was still holding her head in pain while munching on

some bread. In some unspoken agreement, Yoruichi jumped from Robin's shoulder onto the counter the woman sat at while Robin started gathering ingredients for their own meal.

"Morning," the cat said to the blonde. She looked up and blinked at it in surprise before the blonde gave a small groan and answered.

"Morning," She groaned.

"Rough night?" Yoruichi asked.

"Mother of all hangovers, chakra's so dry I can't even heal it." She answered.

"Been there," the cat winced in sympathy but did not comment on the word 'chakra'. "Crazy party?"

"Last I heard, you guys were lost in the Mist civil war. Have you been without a summoner this entire time?" The busty blonde warily eyed the pair.

"I think you might have us confused with someone else, Yoruichi nonchalantly replied. "I'm Yoruichi. This is Sunday. We just woke up here, like you."

"Right," the blonde muttered before taking a swig of her coffee. She placed her hand to her temple, the appendage glowing a pale green. It only lasted for a few seconds, but she looked less like death warmed over. "Let's cut the bullshit. I'm in no mood to pussyfoot around. Who are you? Where are we? What happened to Madara?"

"In order; We just told you. No idea. Who? Also, can we get a name, or should I keep calling you Tits?" The cat replied glibly, which drew a smirk from the blonde.

"Tsunade," the Hokage responded. "So, what can you tell me?"

"There are ten of us. All female, all attractive. We are in an opulent mansion on a cliff on the south side of a Summer Island, a large one based on the mountains. There are animals in the woods and ocean, but no sea kings. I have not found anyone else within ten kilometres of here, though I am still exploring." Robin answered as she finished pleading the two meals.

As she did so, the pirate realized she had been on autopilot. The food looked much better than anything she had ever made before. Taking a bite, it certainly tasted better as well. While she could cook for herself, years spent on the run had taught her self-sufficiency; she was no Sanji. Whatever she had just made looked like skinny pancakes wrapped around some sort of spread filled with fruit and were utterly new to her. Something beyond the kidnapping and rescue from death was bizarre here. But if there is one thing Robin enjoyed, it was a good mystery. Filing it away for later, she passed the plate over to Yoruichi, questioning whether the cat would even be able to eat the meal.

She needn't have bothered. No sooner had the food been placed did the cat jump from the counter to a stool. She was engulfed in a puff of smoke, now sat there with a fork and

knife in hand was the dark-skinned, dark-haired woman. Robin barely paid it any mind. Such things were everyday occurrences on the grand line. The Hokage stared for a moment before she spoke up.

"That's an interesting technique," she said with a smile.

"Thanks," the cat-woman replied, entirely unconcerned with her nudity. "From what we can tell, apart from being attractive women, the only other common factors are that everybody is strong. From what I can tell, the three of us are some of the weakest here." Tsunade eyed her in disbelief, though Robin could accept that. Power was not the be-all-end-all. "Also, out of curiosity, you didn't happen to die right before waking up here?"

"Had my neck snapped," the Hokage nodded in a blase manner. Entirely unconcerned about her 'death', she continued. "So this the Pure Land?"

"I do not believe this to be the afterlife." Robin pipped up as she polished off her breakfast. It was really, really good. She stood and poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot. "Somebody is recruiting. They save us and butter us up with a fancy mansion. Let us get situated, then make their offer. Based on what I've seen, they want us to fight for them. The training yard, the weapons, and the warehouses filled with materials do not paint a pretty picture."

"Sounds like Akatsuki," Tsunade snorted in disgust.

Robin was going to ask a few questions about what she meant when a feeling overcame her. That was the best way to describe it. It was like when you walk into a room, you forget why you came. You stand there for a moment, confused, before deciding to move on with your day. She was curious about what could cause the emotion for a brief moment before her vision swam, distorted and went black.

Her teacup fell to the ground, shattered in shards of porcelain and tea, shocking the two other women in the kitchen.

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The dizziness faded quickly, but Robin had been on guard since her awakening this morning. As soon as she was able, she threw herself against the nearest wall, crossed her arms and prepared to use her devil fruit on whoever had teleported her. She wished she could say that this was the first time something like it had happened, but her life had been far too interesting for that to be the case.

Thankfully, her paranoia was not needed.

Rather than find herself surrounded by hordes of enemies all prepared to take her down, Robin was almost entirely alone in a small and cramped cell. A quick-eyed glance

revealed that she wouldn't have even been able to lay down completely, the cell being too narrow. A few suspicious stains dotted the walls, most looking like dried blood. There was no furniture at all. Light streamed in from what seemed to be a hole in the brickwork of the roof, the harsh sun beating down on the only other occupant of the small room.

He gaped at her in complete astonishment.

He was huddled up in the corner of the room, trying to hide in the shade cast by the few remaining bricks in the ceiling. Robin couldn't look at his complete profile with his arms wrapped around his knees. From what she could tell, he was incredibly skinny, and his skin had the consistency of leather, likely from being out in the sun. Dark-haired and with dark eyes, she estimated he would be about her height if he stood up, but Robin dismissed him as any physical threat because she could see and count his ribs. His only distinctive qualities were a trio of red tattoos that circled his heart around what seemed to be a ring of black fire.

She could tell this because he was completely naked.

More importantly, how had Robin arrived in the cell, and how would she get out?

Thankfully the hole in the roof provided the best means of escape since the cell doors would probably be made of sea stone if they meant the trap her. Peeking her head through the barred door to peer into the hall beyond, she realized it was too dark for her to see anything. Beyond a bit illuminated by the sun that streamed through the cell door, it was pitch black. She didn't see anything beyond some more broken masonry and what seemed to be other prison cells. Robin did hear some movement, though from further beyond.

She was deciding whether it would be better to create an artificial ladder to the ceiling, try and break down the door, or interrogate her fellow prisoner. The other room occupant, quiet until now and completely surprised at her arrival, broke his silence.

With laughter.

It started with a few chuckles at first. As Robin turned to him, he degenerated into hysterical, maniacal laughter. Robin kept an eye on the corridor to see if anyone was approaching to investigate the sound. Thankfully nobody was near, but she kept a wary eye on the prisoner. Who knows what he would do. She tried to wait for his mirth to die down, but he laughed. On and on and on and on. After a minute, she was exasperated. After two, she was a bit crept out, and after three, Robin was getting decidedly nervous. Thankfully he never made it to four.

"Oh man," he said more to himself than to Robin. She could see tears in his eyes, and though he was still smiling, Robin recognized it as the smile of the damned, those who had lost all hope. The way she used to smile. "One time! That was all it took to go hollow, one fucking time. Man, do I suck. This is just sad. I was hoping for at least a dozen, but I

thought I at least had five in me."

"Excuse me," Robin interrupted the old man's ramblings politely. "You wouldn't happen to know where we are?"

"Well," he responded wryly, stretching out on the ground and giving her a view she did not need from a man of his age. He seemed utterly unbothered with his nudity. "I can't confirm this. But I do believe we are in the Asylum." That seemed to send him into another fit of chuckles, though he did not last as long as before.

"Asylum? Which Asylum? Do you know which island we are on?" Her question turned his chuckles into the same maniacal after a before. As if she had just said something amusing. Not willing to waste time anymore, Robin first decided to test the doorway before she left by the roof.

She expected it to be reasonably solid, if not stuck entirely due to how the bars were bent into the doorframe. Robin was unprepared to have her hand pass through the metal as if she were one of Perona's ghosts. Her hand merely moved the metal as if nothing was there. The same happened when she pressed against the brick wall.

"Going somewhere?" The prisoner asked between his giggles.

"Yes, I am getting out of here." Robin could question the materials of her body at a later point. This inmate, whoever he was, was of no help. Better to explore on her own.

Robin stepped through the grated cell door as if it wasn't there and made her way down the hall. Robin made sure to keep her haki activated at all times to be on the safe side. It was more responsive than she was used to, another oddity of the situation. While Robin liked mysteries (to an almost unhealthy degree, Nami once commented), she liked having answers more. The last few hours have provided all too few of those.

While it did get darker further from the cell, Robin could still avoid the holes in the floor and the fungal growths on the wall. Whatever Asylum she was in, it was old if the prisoner was to be believed. Very old. Stone did not erode quickly, especially when not left to the elements. Still, Robin was seeing more than a few signs of degradation. Judging by the dust and dirt accumulation, nobody had been down this particular hall in at least months, if not years. That brought a few questions regarding the prisoner she had just left and how he had survived so long without food. Looking back on her short path through the hall, Robin noticed that she had not left any footprints in the dust either.

She came to the end of the corridor, having passed more than a few cells that were either empty, collapsed, or wholly destroyed. She reached the only intact door she had seen so far, this one a solid slap of metal rather than the bars of the cells. Robin pressed her hand against it to ensure that it would pass through, which it did before walking through completely herself.

No sooner had she arrived on the other side than she found herself yanked the back with violent force. Tumbling to the ground in a heap, Robin quickly righted herself and rose to her feet, ready to confront whatever had grabbed her.

There was nothing there.

Robin was so alone in this dark, dusty prison hall. The shuffling she had noticed earlier was more pronounced and came from beyond the metal door. The only other sound apart from it was the prisoner she had left behind, who had started to hum a little song to himself.

"The sun was setting in the West,
the birds were singing on every tree.
All nature seemed inclined for rest,
but still, there was no rest for me."

Robin tuned him out as she used her Devil Fruit to open an on the ceiling above her head and tried to pass through the door once more. Once again, a tugging sensation around her naval pulled her backwards. She was more prepared for it, she did not fall and instead only stumbled, but that didn't change the fact that there was nothing there.

Robin only stuck her head through the wall, deciding to test something else. This time she was not pulled back and could get a good look. Beyond the metal, door lay what seemed to be another hall. Though this one was almost entirely without light, Robin could spot a few shadows moving in the darkness. A humanoid form seemed to pass right by her, but she could make out nothing else.

Pulling her head backwards, Robin made her way back to the cell, intent on leaving through the hole in the roof.

"~The sea-bound coast, let your mountains, dark and dreary, be. So when I am far away, on the briny ocean toss, will you ever heave a sigh and a wish for me. Will you ever heave a sigh or a wish for me?" The man's haunting sea shanty ended as Robin stepped through the prison cell door. Had this been any other sort of situation, Robin would have applauded. It was an unfamiliar song, but its haunting beauty and the quality of his voice made it one she would remember.

"Sorry about that," he said to her as she reappeared. "You know how it is. I'm a regular jailbird now. And a jailbird's gotta sing, even if it does sound like a bunch of wet cats being thrown against the wall." Despite herself, Robin stifled a giggle, always appreciating a bit of dark humour.

She eyed the hole in the ceiling, about 30 feet, which was really excessive. She was about to use her powers to make a rope of arms and pull herself up when the old man's following words stopped her short.

“Conjuring you up must’ve put me in the mood for the sea. God, would I kill the see the ocean. If I’m gonna rot in here, I wish there would at least be by the water.”

“Conjured?” Robin asked him.

“Hm?” He looked at her in confusion as he chuckled and answered. “Sorry, was that offensive? Imagined? Summoned? Willed into existence? Deluded myself into believing you are real as a last desperate gas of I am mind and soul going hollow? Which do you prefer?”

“You don’t think I’m real?” Robin asked, letting the tension ease from her shoulders. And she had hoped she had finally found the lead on the strange happenings of the morning. That tension shot right back with his following words.

“Course you’re not real. How else would Nico Robin of all people end up in my tiny cell in the Asylum?”

“You know who I am?” She asked tersely, hoping to finally get some concrete answers. The little back-and-forth with your Yoruichi had been more confusing than illuminating. Even Tsunade, for all that she had been an open book, had brought on more questions than answers.

“Yep! You’re a figment of my imagination. I would have to know who you are to imagine you being here.”

“Not that,” she snapped. “You know my name.”

“Nico Robin, Devil Child, Straw Hat Pirate, the most wanted woman in the world. Intelligent, deadly, beautiful, and right now being an abysmal example of a delusion. Aren’t you supposed to convince me to kill everybody or something? I’m not exactly sure how hollowing is supposed to work. All you’ve done so far is ask stupid questions and passed through a few walls. I’m a bit disappointed, to be honest. I was expecting you to convince me that I needed to go out on a mass murder spree, not that I could, or maybe sacrifice a chicken to our Lord Gwen or something. For shame undying curse. Taking the form of one of my favourite characters of all time and not even trying to seduce me to the dark side. Deplorable service. 2/5 stars. Would not recommend it. At least the staff was excellent.”

The man’s ramblings sounded more than a bit insane, but Robin at least got confirmation that he knew her. Deciding to stop him as he rambled on, she reached out to grab him something about there not being any cookies. She planned to shake sense into him, only for her arms to pass through his body like they had all other objects since her appearance in this abnormal cell.

“… Though, they would be oatmeal raisin, wouldn’t they? Indeed the dark Souls of cookies. Prepare to die.” He noticed her movement and gave her a warm and heartbroken

smile. “Cant even seduce me? Make that one out of five stars. I’m desperate, but if I’m going to hold a delusion for warmth, I’d rather be able to touch it. While vampires can be attractive, no matter how beautiful a ghost is, you can’t really do anything with it.”

“Focus!” Robin said. “I am real! You know who I am. Do you know how I got here?”

“If you’re so real, what’s behind door number one?” He asked as he nodded his head towards the cell door.

“I don’t know. I was yanked backwards as soon as I tried to pass through the door at the end of the hall.”

“That is precisely what a figment of my imagination would say.” He crowed triumphantly.

“I am not a figment of your imagination,” Robin said, taking a deep breath. There was no point antagonizing the man. Not like she could do anything to him anyway. “The other side of the metal door was too dark to see, though I did notice some humanoid-shaped beings walking around.”

“I could’ve told you that,” he snorted in derision. “I can hear them shuffling, hollows if I’m not mistaken. Most of them would be too stupid to know how to open the door. Is there anything that you could say I wouldn’t know about?”

Robin bit her lip in thought. What did he know about her? It could be from wanted posters and news or private Marine information. She had no idea what would be new information to him. Her best bet was something recent which meant she either had to talk about this morning or that. She went with the safer option.

“I woke up this morning in a mansion on an island I have never heard about. I was not the only one. There are other women there. I only got a few names, Yoruichi, Raven, Diana and Tsunade. While we were having breakfast, I suddenly appeared here. Do you have any idea what is going on?”

For the first time since she had appeared in the cell, Robin saw the smile drop from his face. He looked at her, really looked at her for the first time. There was an intensity in his eyes, hope and a fire that had not been there before.

“How do you know those names?” He asked.

“I talked to them,” she answered, happy to finally be getting somewhere. “As I said, we are having breakfast. That is where I met Tsunade, but Yoruichi and I had been exploring the mansion before that. You know who they are.”

“Of course I know who they are!” He answered succinctly, no longer looking at her but instead staring up at the hole in the ceiling. She could almost see his mind working away. “Describe them to me, just to be sure. Was there anybody else?”

Deciding to keep the conversation going, Robin did as he asked.

She described the cat woman, Tsunade, and the other women she had seen in passing. From the armoured brunette to the cloaked women and the blondes in the other hall. She also described what she had seen of the island and mansion.

“The entire build? Then why was the island so big? I didn’t have enough points.” The man murmured to himself. “If so, why am I?” He trailed off before looking at her. “Never mind that. If what you said is true, I might have an idea about what is going on. That is, of course, I am not imagining this entire conversation. Delusions and hope are dangerous things. Good thing I have nothing to lose.”

“Go on.”

“So this will require a bit of explanation.” He stood up. She had guessed right about his size as he came up a bit taller than her. He started pacing back and forth around the small space of his cell, still uncaring about his nudity. “I am guessing you don’t know anything about multi-verse theory?”

“Never heard of it,” she answered as she sat down in an opposite corner of the room.

“Basic idea is that anything is possible in some alternate timeline. What if you decide to go left instead of right? Ate this rather than that for breakfast? What if you were never born? What if you were born a redhead? What if you were born a guy? An infinite number of options leads to an endless number of parallel worlds. And, much like if you had enough monkeys with typewriters, you would eventually get a complete stage play, with enough parallel worlds, anything is possible. Even the travel between them. Are you following me so far?”

“Seems simple enough.” She might have read a novel about something similar years ago.

“Right,” he stared at her for a moment before continuing. “I forgot you had a degree in archaeology at age 8. Anyway, if you want more information, you should talk to Wonder Woman or Raven.” At her blank look, he explained. “The woman with the tiara and the cloaked woman, respectively. You could also ask Medea, the other one in the cloak. Either way, they have probably more first-hand experience than anyone else with something like that if you want more information. That is, if you can get back to the mansion or if they get teleported to the cell as well. But I digress.”

“Basically, going by the theory that anything is possible, any story ever told actually happened, in this reality or another. Every fantasy book, every mythological tale, it’s all real somewhere out there. As we talk, even you and I are being written about and read somewhere somehow. That’s how I know who all of you were. You were characters in a story originating from different universes.”

“So you still think I am not real?”

“Until such time as I can prove one way or another, I must act as if you are real. Actually wrote a book on the subject, but that is neither here nor there. If you think you are real, you are. No matter what anyone else might claim. Moving on, there is something for you to test when you manage to get back to the island. Look around for Raven. She should have pale skin, purple hair, and a red jewel on her forehead.”

“You seem certain I’ll be able to get back.”

“If I’m right, there shouldn’t be an issue. But we’ll get to that. Now, as for what I think happened. A few years ago, somebody threw together a challenge in my world. The premise was that you are given a limited number of points. You used them to purchase a retinue who are assigned a value based on strength. You are to be thrown into a fictional world with your purchases, sometimes on a mission. Sometimes as a simple what-if scenario. Over the years, the original challenge has been changed, updated, and used for everything from gripping character examinations to straight-up porn, as you can imagine.”

“So you’re saying,” Robin piped up, having never been one to care about any sort of taboo and trying to put the man on the back foot. “That you masturbated to porn of me.”

“More than you could possibly imagine,” the man deadpanned that her before resuming his pacing. “Get used to it. If the multi-verse theory holds true, some fat degenerate slob is jerking off to you, me, a monkey, a trashcan, and a pile of vomit. Even all the above.” She shuddered in revulsion at the image. “You see why most people try not to think too deeply about it. Anyway, we got off-topic. I’m telling you this because I think this challenge, colloquially known as the waifu catalogue or rule 34 catalogue, has something to do with our situation. First of all, I had taken up that challenge as a joke. The world I believe I am in was rated highly for danger and thus afforded me quite a few points. About two weeks ago, I wrote a short little story. It was a joke about how it would be straightforward to overpower this entire world and that it shouldn’t be rated so highly. I threw together in an afternoon to entertain myself.”

“And I was one of your purchases,” Robin said with distaste, not liking how it compared to slavery.

“Bitch please,” he waved off her distaste. “You were my first pick. Granted, that was more for utility, espionage, and crowd control than sheer power. As I said before, you’re one of my favourite characters.” Robin didn’t know if she was flattered by that but decided that thinking about it could wait. She waved him on. “Anyway, realistically, the group I assembled would be able to completely curb stop any challenges this world presented. The biggest problem would be getting from place to place, and even that could be solved by either Medea or Raven with a bit of time. Once we completely obliterated our foes, we would be able to travel the multi-verse, even getting you ladies home. It would be easy,

quick, and the most significant challenge would have been getting everybody on the same page. There was no romance, no porn, not even hand-holding. Truly I fail as a degenerate." The man muttered to himself.

"So what happened?" She prodded, trying to get him on track before he degenerated again.

"I have no idea," he stomped his feet and frustration. "As I said, I wrote the little story about two weeks ago and put it out of my mind. When I appeared in here," he waved to the cell walls. "I figured it had been a dimensional anomaly. In an infinite number of worlds, people are guaranteed to slip through the cracks sometimes. I just thought I just had the shitiest luck ever. That was a month ago."

"A month? How are you still alive?"

The man didn't answer, but he smiled sardonically at Robin and tapped his finger out the black mark on his chest.

"Same way I guessed where I was. But no matter what I did, how long I waited, nothing was getting me out of this damn cell. Where's Oscar when you need him. And then you showed up. You can't touch anything, right?"

"Nothing so far?" She half asked, not knowing where this was going.

"What I think happened is that all the benefits, such as the mansion and the help you girls were supposed to provide, were given to the women I chose. While I got trapped here with no benefits. If I'm correct, you should all notice being much stronger than before, being able to make the most delicious food, as well as other things. That also means that you will be trapped on the island, even if it is a paradise until I can get out of this Asylum and link the damn fire. If I'm lucky, that is all we will need to get out of this mess."

"Assuming you are right," Robin decides to play the devil's advocate, "which we don't know you are, that helps us how?" I could not travel very far, and I couldn't physically interact with anything. I won't be of much help. I still do not know why or how I was teleported here."

"That's where the testing will come in. Good old scientific method. Trial and error. If I'm right, you women won't be able to help me directly, but indirect help can be precious. There might be ways of getting around whatever the restriction that makes you unable to interact with the world. The first test we can do right now. Can we get you back to the mansion?"

"All right," Robin said, standing up. They had a plan. Plans were good. Plans were better than wandering around aimlessly. "What do I need to do."

"Before anything else, if I am right and you do make it back to the mansion, I need you to promise me to try and replicate whatever brought you here. Without help, there is

no guarantee I will ever be able to make it out of this cell, and we will remain prisoners. Promise me." He stared into her eyes intensely as if willing her to understand the severity of the situation.

"I promise to do my best." The way he eyed her told her that he knew exactly what she was doing with the way she worded the promise, but he sighed in defeat and whispered, "That will have to do."

"Once you get back, ask Tsunade to drop her transformation. Be prepared to dodge. That should prove I know what I am talking about." She looked at him in confusion but nodded. "All right, if I'm correct, you should be able to enter the mansion from wherever and whenever you want. Stand in front of the door. Imagine you are opening an entry into the mansion. Any of the doors that you said you used this morning. As you do that, try and open the cell door."

Robin furled her brows in concentration, imagined the door in front of her was a solid oak one attached to her bedroom in the mansion and reached out. Her hand touched something, and as she pulled, space distorted in front of her till she looked at a rippling rectangle of gray.

No sooner had the odd doorway appeared than the old man rushed through her incorporeal form and tried to throw himself through the passage. He bounced violently off the metal bars that lay beyond.

"Worth a shot," he grumbled as he clutched his head pain in a ball on the floor.

Robin stepped through the passage and reappeared in the villa's kitchen, giving him one last look.

She heard her teacup crash to the ground and stood a foot behind her seat at the counter. Both Yoruichi and Tsunade jumped at the noise and her displacement, but Robin paid them no mind. She was eager to solve a few mysteries.

"I need you to drop your transformation?"

The pirate was happy her Haki had warned her enough to duck under the flying plate.

Author's Note:

This is the beginning of Part 1 of the 'Prologue'. I have it thoroughly planned out and will be adding tags as we go. Most chapters are only about half this length, about 4 thousand words. I can write one of them in a week in my spare time. I will post half a chapter every Monday and Friday, so about 2000~ or so words per update. The next release will be Monday the 13th.

Feel free to point out any mistakes or ways to improve. Any feedback will go a long way to making the story better in the long run. At the end of the 'Prologue', I will return to these early chapters to update them.

CONFINEMENT II

I felt an angel's kiss, soft upon my cheek.
And oh, without a single word of caring did it speak.

"He's not telling us everything," Yoruichi said as she lounged on the beach chair in the sun, nude like her companions. Whatever this subdimension thing was, it sure replicated the heat of a sunny beach rather well. Much better than anything Kisuke had ever made.

"He isn't," the blonde to her right answered. "Everybody is always hiding something. Is it going to fuck us over? That is the important part." The shinigami eyed her drinking partner lustfully. She was going to get her hands on those tits if it was the last thing she did.

"I do not think it is too important," the brunette to her left answered as she flipped a page in her book. While not as bodacious as the blonde, Yoruichi had no set preference and wouldn't mind a tussle in the sheets with her either. "As far as I'm aware, he has responded to every question we asked to the best of his abilities. I'm sure he hasn't told us everything, but neither have we. Mikael seems more desperate than traitorous. At least the first time I was summoned, it seemed so. This morning, he kept asking more questions, specifically about the time between summons on our end and any discoveries we had made about the Island."

Robin was one of those who talked to their jailer the most. While everybody got summoned, once they appeared before their 'jailor', they could return to the Island at will. The first few times Yoruichi had been displaced, she had stuck around a while to get a feel for the old man in the cell. After a few times, however, since there was not much to do, she shared a few words with Mikael and returned. That was the same for most of the other women on the Island, from her understanding. The Witch and Robin were the exceptions.

"Not much to explain, really," Yoruichi responded. "It's an island paradise with the most advanced luxurious mansion I've ever seen. There are enough books to make any library jealous, more food than we could ever eat, and any sort of device we could ever need. Medea says there is enough magical material to build some kind of superweapon. Since, you know, magic is apparently real."

"Missing the Biju in the room, aren't you?" Her blonde companion said as she took a sip of her sake and pointed upwards. "Or, you know, the dragon in the sky?"

"Of course, how could I forget the Dragon? The one the size of a country?" Yoruichi replied sarcastically as she took a sip of her fruity alcoholic drink. One of the perks of the

mansion was any sort of alcoholic drink they could ever want was available at a moment's notice.

The giant beast was rather well hidden in the light of day. The sun and the few clouds in the sky made it hard to tell, but as soon as night fell, it became apparent that this Island was not attached to any planet. Instead, it seemed to be held between the claws of an enormous white Dragon. Really, the only way they could tell it was a Dragon (since all they could see were the claws wrapped around the Island) was because of Robin. Her nifty little ability to sprout her appendages on places she could see made for great scouting. Even those with the ability to fly (Yoruichi, Diana, Raven, and even Artoria with her horse) hadn't been able to approach. An invisible bubble kept them trapped.

That hadn't stopped Robin. She had spent quite a bit of her time exploring the great beast over the last week. Thanks to her, the group of women knew about their rough situation.

According to the pirate, the Island was slightly over 240 km in diameter. It was ringed in on all sides by the ocean for about 10km. All of it was held in a massive jewelled bubble around which the Dragon had curled. Since the scale was so massive and the beast wasn't at full length, Robin hadn't been able to give an exact number on size but had estimated it to be about three times the length of the bubble. That put it at about 750 km in length.

Which was insane.

It was also floating in space, and from what Robin could tell, there had been no planet or star nearby. It had taken so long to piece this all together because Robin's separate bodies hadn't been able to survive for more than a few moments in the vacuum.

"When I described everything to Mikael, he believed that the Dragon was supposed to be the body he was supposed to transform into. Or at least one form of it." Robin answered as she turned another page in her book.

"How was that going to work?" Tsunade asked, taking another swig. Yoruichi watched intensely as a drop spilled from the jug and made its way sensually down the woman's pale breasts.

"Apparently," Robin said as she put down her book to take a sip of tea for a moment. "The form he filled out as a setup for this little adventure was based on points. He spent most of his points on purchasing us, but the rest he put into "becoming the Dragon." He explained that it was supposed to have a whole bunch of benefits. Making all of us stronger and allowing us to travel between dimensions and thus home. Obviously, things didn't turn out like he planned."

"No shit," Yoruichi said sarcastically as she flipped herself onto her front. She wasn't going to be getting a tan from this. She just liked the feel of the heat on her body. "What

else did he buy with these points?"

"Mikael claimed to not remember the specifics; he insists that it was mainly a joke story he planned to write, so he didn't take careful note of the extras. It was also a while ago. Most of it was focused on purchasing things that would upgrade the Dragon or make life more bearable such as our new skill with cooking. He also claims that this Island and mansion shouldn't be this large. He did not have enough points for it. However, there is one purchase that he remembered that I believe everyone should know about, something called a Warranty Plan. He wasn't too specific on the mechanics. Essentially we would come back to life within three days if any of us were to die. So long as he is alive, that is."

"Well, shit," Tsunade replied after downing her entire bottle. "There goes my plan of drinking myself to the grave." Yoruichi chuckled to herself, and Robin cracked a smile. "If he could control that giant beast, I bet it would make any challenge a joke. Makes a Biju look tiny. But yeah, the rest should probably know about immortality. Where is everybody?"

"Princess is currently sparring with the Titty King and Scathach," Yoruichi replied as she felt for their spiritual power. She really needed a nickname for the Queen of Shadows. It wasn't fair otherwise. "Teach is in the library, and the Witch is still in her workshop. The goth is in the kitchen. And Queenie is in her room. As far as I'm aware, she has not come out of it since she got back last night."

"Do you think he used one of those command spell things on her then?" Tsunade asked as she reached for another bottle.

"Probably," Robin answered. "I think that would be the only way she would know to ask Artoria about it. Mikael still had all six when I was summoned this morning. When I asked about them, we experimented. I think they recharge since he didn't see any problem using them. Everything else lines up with what Medea explained. The more specific the order, the more powerful it is. It could be used to override normal limits and force us to do things we don't want to."

Yoruichi and Tsunade looked concerned before the blonde asked: "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Robin waved their concerns away with nonchalance. "He kept it open-ended, just ordered me to tell him a secret I didn't want him to know. I went with an easy one, so we have leeway in interpreting his orders if he decides to use the seals."

"Can he use them to summon us? Physically, I mean? The Witch said it was one of their uses." Yoruichi asked. "If we can get him out of that cell, we would probably be able to make some progress."

"Unfortunately not. Whatever is summoning us ensures that no matter what, we cannot physically interact with him or the world around him. There is some good news,

however. While we were experimenting, he seemed to get an idea about how to get out of his cell."

"That's good," the tanned beauty said. "I felt bad about relaxing and enjoying the beach while he is imprisoned."

"It's not as if any of us asked for this," Tsunade commented, idly rubbing her throat. An action the former special forces commander had noticed her doing unconsciously on occasion. "While it sucks for him, none of us asked to be kidnapped to this island either."

"Still, if he is to be believed, then our best chance at freedom is for him to complete whatever sort of task he was summoned to that asylum to do. I do not believe whoever set this all up did it to leave him in a cell forever." Robin pointed out.

"Speaking of which," Yoruichi piped in. "Do either of you have the time? I've been waiting for a while but haven't been summoned yet. I wanted to get out of the way before meeting with the others for a spar, but it's been hours."

"It's about three. I thought your turn was at noon?" The blonde Hokage asked as she looked over at the mocha-skinned woman.

"It's probably him trying to test a few more things," Robin explained. "We wanted to see if he could try and summon someone in a different order or at different times. More than likely, one of those two worked."

"Dammit, we had the board up and everything," Yoruichi complained. "If I'm going to be interdimensionaly kidnapped, make it consistent."

So far, the summoning had followed the same pattern. Starting at 9 AM with three-hour intervals between and ending at 9 PM. It also followed the same order. Starting with Robin, Yoruichi, Raven, Scathach, Medea, Diana, Tsunade, Artoria, Glynda, and finished with Emma. This two-day cycle had been the pattern for the last week and a half. The women on the Island had gotten used to the schedule. They had settled down and had fallen into a rough routine of keeping themselves occupied while waiting for something to change. They had already tried all their means of escape, and since they had failed, there wasn't much they could do but relax and enjoy themselves.

Most of the time, the more intellectual ones, such as Robin and Glynda, gravitated towards the library, and Medea seemed to be doing a lot in her workshop. Still, everyone else was finding themselves rather bored. They may do with sparring, exercise, getting to know each other, sometimes watching stuff on TV, playing games, and relaxing in one form or another.

Yoruichi had noticed everybody had been very tense at first. More than a little bit jumpy, but that tension disappeared over the week. It was replaced by a sense of bored ease.

“The more we know, the more options we have to get out. I just found out I am immortal. As lovely as this place is, I would rather not spend eternity trapped here.” Tsunade said after finishing her second bottle and standing up from her beach chair. “I’m going for a swim.”

Yoruichi admired how the sunlight reflected off of her pale skin. Her figure was voluptuous, to say the least. Out of all the women on the Island, she was probably the most busty. There was no denying that everybody on this Island was beautiful, and the cat woman would love to ‘test’ everyone’s size to get the exact ranking. If Yoruichi had to be stuck somewhere for a while, this was certainly not the worst place nor the worst company. Who knows what could happen while they waited.

But that was for the future; now, Yoruichi was in the mood for some wet fun with the blonde. She smiled a little joke in her head before standing up and answering. “If I’m not going to be summoned, I might as well have some fun.” She stretched a little after hours of inactivity, enjoying how her companion’s eyes roamed her naked body before she started making her way toward the water.

“Oh, come on!” She complained. Between one step in the next, she disappeared.

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After her teleportation, Yoruichi did not even take a moment to realize something had changed. Gone was the cramped cell and dark hall. She had appeared in some sort of grassy ruin. Judging by the statue, arches, and vaulted ceiling, it had once been a temple.

It had seen better days.

The roof was almost completely destroyed, exposing the interior to the elements. A pool of water had gathered on the floor, and plants had taken over every surface. Beyond an arched doorway, Yoruichi could see green grass, more ruined walls and a massive cliff face.

A man was sitting on the base of the stairs near the entrance, dangling his bare feet in the water. He was unfamiliar. Like someone had tied pieces of metal together in an approximation of armour, he was wearing the tattered remains of metal and leather. He was large. He would tower over the shinigami’s 5ft 1’ by at least a foot if he was standing. Dark hair and eyed, his face was solid but plain. Maybe low thirties? Mortal ages were always confusing. He was also staring right at her.

“If nothing else, the eye candy is nice.” He said as he eyed her naked form. Emotions passed through his face quickly. She recognized lust, longing, fondness, and something else. Then, it flickered into a grimace before going completely blank. “It’s good to see you

again, Floof."

"Old man?" She asked. The old prisoner had been the only one to call her by that nickname. He blinked at her before a look of realization came over him.

"This is what I actually look like." Mikael waved a hand over his profile. "I was… transformed while in the cell." She expected he was hiding something, but he pushed on and waved grandly around the ruin. "Welcome to Firelink Shrine. Please leave no footprints and take no pictures. Shanking guaranteed. An existential crisis is included in your experience. Our health insurance package is extra. All suicides are to be at the cliffs, per regulations."

That was the Mikael, alright. From what Yoruichi had heard, only Robin enjoyed his dark humour.

"How'd you manage to get out?" Yoruichi asked.

"Squeezed through the bars," he shrugged the question off. "How long has it been on your end since Robin arrived?"

"Six hours, I thought I wouldn't be summoned, so I was at the beach with the girls." She stretched her body provocatively to tease him. He eyed her appreciatively but, beyond that, did not respond.

"As you can see, I enjoy a five-star resort too." He replied sarcastically.

"At least it smells better here." It was delicious. Yoruichi couldn't put the finger on the exact scent, but it reminded her of some of the better times. Of silk sheets and her Little Bee. She inhaled deeply again, lost in fond nostalgia.

"Couldn't tell ya, can't smell anything." Mikael shrugged. "Anyway, you can tell the others that the time between summonings should be six hours now. It will be a bit inconvenient, but it should lower the time you all are trapped on the Island. I'll be trying a few more tests. I can make some actual progress. Before you go exploring, can you help answer a few questions?"

"Sure," Yoruichi answered with a deep breath. She was in no rush. The following few minutes were occupied with a back and forth. Like always, the man had a million and one questions.

Could she sense him now that he was out of the cell? No.

Could she sense anyone or anything around him? No.

How far could she travel in a straight line without going through anything? 50 meters.

Did passing through matter lower the distance? Yes, irrespective of material and thickness, every time she passed through something, it reduced her total length by 10 meters.

Could she still use her powers to fly, transform, etc.? Yes.

Could the cleric in the other room, the woman in the cell, or the downtrodden man see or hear her? No. Though Yoruichi did have a few questions of her own about those people.

“Not counting that mountain, the city goes beyond my eyesight,” Yoruichi reported. Mikael had asked her to go as high as possible and use her superior vision to estimate the size of the city below. This Firelink Shrine was about a fifth of the way up this massive cliff. An absolutely enormous metropolis was sprawled out at its foot, and she had spotted the hints of a wall on its peak. “Which means it is bigger than Tokyo, I think around the size of Shikoku. I can’t go far enough to verify, but it is enormous.”

“Shikoku’s one of the islands, right? The smallest of the main four?” He asked. She nodded. “Larger than I thought, though I guess it makes sense. Gods wouldn’t do anything but overcompensate.”

“Why’d you do it anyway?” Yoruichi couldn’t help but ask as she sat down beside him. At his questioning look, she explained. “From what Robin told me, you could have chosen any world you were familiar with, right? Why this one?”

“She did tell you it was supposed to be a joke, right?” He tried to scoot farther away from her, but she followed him. Partly for the lovely smell, somewhat to tease him. It didn’t seem to work, he seemed unconcerned with her nakedness, but he did flash an annoyed look at her. She smiled smugly. He stopped trying to run. “This world was originally a video game in my world. You familiar with them?”

“I know the basics. Kisuke went on a brief kick of them for a while. Never saw the appeal.”

“In the challenge I filled out, all worlds were assigned a difficulty. The higher the difficulty, the more points to spend. This world was rated at 9, the second-highest possible. It is filled with Gods, Dragons, Demons, and Magic. It is in a constant cycle of destruction and rebirth, spanning hundreds of thousands of years. We are currently at the tail end of the first cycle, one of the bleakest times on this planet. There are worlds at the same level which would be safer in many ways.”

“Then why?” She asked again.

“Because of the foundation of this world, its core philosophy. Anyone can overcome anything, so long as they have the will and dedication. The strongest of Gods can be felled by the weakest of beings. Even me. I’ve been in three fights my entire life, got my ass kicked in every one. Imagine a world like that, but suddenly there are ten new people. Each is more potent or more versatile than the last. Some are strong enough to kill the strongest beings with barely any effort.”

“So what? We come, destroy everything in our way, and go home?” She asked in

disbelief.

“Pretty much. The story I wrote was about ten thousand words, most spent getting everyone on the same page. While Diana is probably the most dangerous in a one-on-one, you all were picked for various uses. Artoria could carpet bomb this entire city into rubble in an afternoon with enough magic power. Scathach made the equivalent of a rocket ship on a desert island in a week. With Medea’s help, one of the greatest mages to ever live, who knows what they could accomplish. Those two are probably the most versatile.

You and Raven are great at information gathering and mobility, to say nothing of your fighting abilities. Tsunade would be around to heal anyone up. She can also destroy most buildings with a flick of her fingers. Emma would be in charge of coordination between all the disparate people. Glynda would aid by her excellent terrain control, unlocking everyone’s Aura and teaching them how to use it. With her Devil Fruit and Haki, Robin would be our best scout. She is categorically the weakest of you ten, but I would still bet her against all but the best armies this world offers.

After kicking ass, I use one of the abilities of that dragon body and teleport everyone home, including myself. It would take a week, maybe a month at most. We all get Aura, some new friends, and a fantastic story. I become a dragon to travel the multiverse, perhaps visiting you every once in a while.”

“Sounds like a good plan, if it worked.” She couldn’t help but point out. If there was anything she had learned with Kisuke, no plan was foolproof.

“If it worked,” Mikael nodded to her point. “Now it seems like it is up to me to get us out of here. We are lucky. With enough willpower and time, even I can overcome this. I had been torn between this world and a cultivation world.”

“A what?”

“Think of a place where everybody has the power of the Spirit King at the minimum, will genocide for the slightest perceived insult and who can measure lifetimes in billions of years.” Yoruichi shuddered at the image. That sounded like hell. “Exactly. This world is no longer a game and is much larger than it was portrayed. But the fundamental mechanics of it are the same. I can get strong enough to overcome pretty much anything here.”

“So long as you don’t die.”

“I can one hundred percent guarantee I will not die.” He smirked at her as if he knew she wasn’t getting a joke. “You girls can sit tight, it might take a while, but I will get out of this. Trust me, I hate this more than you.” Mikael looked severe enough that Yoruichi decided to change the subject. A better one. Teasing.

“So,” she leaned closer to him. Her boobs would be pressed against his arm if she could touch him. “Ten beautiful women? All from your wildest fantasies? Somebody was

thinking dirty thoughts?"

"More than you can possibly imagine," he deadpanned in response.

"You definitely have a type," she raised her bust enticingly. She again saw that flash of desire on his face, but it disappeared quicker than before.

"I do," he admitted. "I do prefer women with curves, both butt and breasts. Hips and thighs as well. Height doesn't matter, but I guess I would like tall women if forced to choose. Bite-sized can be fun, though." She refused to blush as he eyed her hungrily. She knew when she was being teased in turn. "Lollies are fine, but not really my preference."

"It's no fun if you are so open." The cat woman pouted. "Berryboy was way better, all blushing and stuttering."

"I know what I like; no reason to be ashamed of it. Besides, my choices only matched my physical preferences this time because of coincidence." At her disbelieving look, he explained. "More than body type, personalities and powers were the main factors in my decision. I explained why everyone would be helpful, but the personality types were also significant. All of you are competent, mature, skilled, and willing to work with others to achieve your goals. It would take minimal convincing to get everyone to cooperate."

"So what? You love us for who we are, not our bodies?" She said it in a teasing way, clearly meant as a joke. His face contorting in rage was utterly unexpected, and she leaned away at the ferocity in his eyes.

"I do not love you! Any of you!" He snarled. "I barely know you! What I see on the screen or in a book are merely some parts of your lives and characters. That is not enough to fall in love. We've spent a few hours together, nowhere near enough."

"Woah, it was just a joke," she raised her hands placatingly. "No need to take it so seriously." Mikael took a deep breath, leaning back from looming over her.

"Sorry," he said finally. "Sore spot. One of the 'perks' of the challenge was the ability to influence the mind of your summons. It could take many forms, but they all boiled down to mind-controlling other people to love you. I hate that."

"I get ya. I couldn't stand what Aizen was doing either."

"It is not the same," he shook his head. "While I do not agree or like a lot of what Aizen did, the fundamental mechanics of his ability was only deceiving the senses. Even if what you see, hear, taste, smell, and feel are wrong, you are still you. If someone messes with your mind directly, the you from before ceases to exist in every conceivable way. Someone or something else has taken your place. Reversing it is impossible. You would just be killing the new thing to create another replacement. If somebody takes over my body and moves it like a puppet, it would be better than that kind of death."

"If you say so," Yoruichi decided to drop the topic rather than argue. He hadn't had to

live with the aftermath of the betrayal, the fear of your own senses turning against you. Never trusting anything. He hadn't had to help Momo put her life back together after her world was shattered. At least that instant of rage was gone now.

"Anyway, I wrote the story as if it was really going to happen. So no mind control. Our relationships with each other would be cordial and friendly, but I couldn't see any romance blossoming."

"Why not?" She couldn't help but ask. They didn't know each other too well, but that wasn't a reason to write it off. If nothing else, now that he didn't look like dried jerky, she wouldn't mind a tussle in the sheets. Nothing so far had been too much of a turn-off for her.

"Because I'm a possessive bastard. Possessive, hypocritical, sadistic, with a hint of fair play." He answered. "Possessive; I can only dedicate myself wholly to a relationship if I know the other is. Bastard; because I won't cheat, but I will coerce and manipulate. While consent is the greatest of all fetishes, consent can be extensive."

"What do you mean?"

"You know why I like competent and mature women?" Mikael asked rhetorically, his mood changing harshly once more. He loomed over her again; the intense look in his eyes captivated her. "My ideal is a woman I can have a serious talk with, intelligent enough to provide input and ideas. Then I make them into my mewling love slave. I like breaking them. That's one of the reasons I dislike mind control. It takes out all the challenges. The thrill of the hunt. Over months and years, I seduce and twist. Little things at first, you can't live without me by the end. Take you, for example."

"Me?" Yoruichi asked in a hoarse whisper. Why was her throat so dry? The smell overcame her. It reminded her of silk, but they were ropes instead of sheets. No more did she think of the worshipful touch of her Little Bee. Now she thought of a body pressing her down in passion. His voice entranced the shinigami.

"You," he all but growled. "It would start simple. A night of passion, maybe some alcohol. You are no blushing virgin, but it would still be a night to remember. Then a second night, a third. I would never force you. You are a free cat, after all." He raised his hand to caress her cheek, but it passed through without touching. She shivered non the less. "You would come back anyway, the pleasure I could provide growing over time as I learn your every. Little. Trick." She swallowed. "Then I'd escalate. Little changes. Some spanking, maybe handcuffs. By the end, you'd be tied to my bed in nothing but a collar. You would be my little pet. My little Floof."

Mikael's honeyed whispers hung in the air before he sat back with a chuckle. "Never going to happen. In the original story, we were together for a week, nowhere enough time

to break any of you.”

She took the chance to dive through an open portal behind her as he chuckled at her.

Both Tsunade and Robin eyed her oddly as she shook her fist at the sky, vowing revenge. They were kind enough to not mention if they noticed her erect nipples and slick thighs.

It would only be in a few hours after she had calmed down that Yoruichi would realize he completely changed the topic to avoid providing a proper explanation. Definitely hiding something.

Author's Note:

Yoruichi is was a pleasure to write,

Fun fact: The story I keep referencing was a real thing. I wrote it while bored in one 10-hour stretch. The computer it was on was recked but I kept thinking about. Thus, Rapturous Rhapsody.

A bit more exposition than I would like in this one, though I feel it is warented. As mentioned, all these choices were made specifically to curb the Soulsborne world, (though I am sure there are more optimal purchases). Without mind control I had to think in relationship dynamics, which was challenging but fun.

I am trying to show the characters learning about their situation together, while maintaining their own interests. They are all unriliable narators. Things are going to speed up a bit, more timeskips, but I still want to portray the relationship growth. So, let me know how I'm doing.

Next chapter on the 17th, might be a full one depending on if I have the time.

CONFINEMENT III

I felt an angel's loving touch, soft upon my heart
And with that touch, I felt the pain and hurt within depart

"I've never seen a Semblance quite like this." Glynda walked around the massive Gate. It looked solid, just like her regular Gate of Skye. The fortress behind it was ephemeral, clearly made out of her Aura and was unfamiliar, though.

"Are you certain it is not made of magic?"

"The Gate is the same as my Noble Phantasm," Scathach replied. The runes upon the door were different. Focused more on defence than entrapment. The Celtic witch knew its use instinctively but asked for her fellow teacher's insight. She had only had Aura for less than a week, after all. She shivered. Scathach could not remember the last time she had something new to learn. "Normally, when a Heroic Spirit is summoned as a Servant, they only have access to one Noble Phantasm."

"Because of the limits of Servant containers, correct?" Glynda asked, clearly remembering Medea's impromptu lessons on the nature of Heroic Spirits, Servants, and the Grail Wars.

"There are exceptions." The lancer nodded. "If legends are intertwined, two weapons or abilities can count as one Noble Phantasm. If you need one to use the other. Artoria's horse and lance, for example. Sometimes a Phantasm might be lowered in power and count as a personal skill instead. That happens with passive abilities most of the time. This summoning has been different. We are more robust, are not dependent on mana to maintain our forms, and have access to Noble Phantasms we shouldn't have. We are also all three getting the bonus to parameters we would receive if summoned and fighting in our homeland. Our bodies are still made of spiritual particles but act as if alive in every conceivable manner."

"The other two as well?"

"Artoria still has her spear, though it is much more potent than it would be if she was summoned as a lancer. She also has her great hall, Ehangwen. Some skills from her knights count as pseudo-Noble Phantasms. Medea, I have not asked yet. I do not know if either has discovered their Semblance. I have access to all of my Phantasms, however. My Gate and Gae Bolg." The Huntress was silent for a moment. She continued to prod the Gate and the illusionary castle with her own Semblance.

"I have a few theories. Nothing is confirmed before the other two achieve their own

Semblances." Scathach nodded for her to continue. "I believe it is due to the fact that you are essentially ghosts. Aura, and semblances by extension, are the manifestation of the soul. From my understanding, your Noble Phantasms are as entwined with your souls as they can be. Having a Semblance manifest in a similar form shouldn't be too surprising."

"That was my theory as well." While no magus, Scathach knew more than most about the nature of the soul. It was why she preferred to use Gae Bolg rather than the Gate. Deciding that she didn't need it anymore, the Queen of the Land of Shadows dissipated the Gate and its ghostly castle. Her Aura was only slightly lowered from the expenditure.

"Have you made any progress with Haki?" The blonde asked as the Queen stood from her seat on the ground. The pair were in a deep jungle clearing on the other side of the mountain range. The island was massive, and the pair of teachers had been exploring for the last few days. The team could carry any needed supplies using Glynda's Semblance and Scathach's runes. Not that they needed much, more than capable of hunting any wildlife for food.

"I have focused more on Armament." She summoned a Gae Bolg to her hand. After a few moments, the air around the barbed spear distorted and black spread across its red surface. She held it for a moment before letting the new power and the spear disappear. "It is not usable in combat, but I have progressed."

"Observation has been my focus," Glynda explained, waving her riding crop. A boar squealed in the distance, almost a kilometre away. It was dragged before the pair by the Huntress' telekinesis in a few seconds. A massive beast, twice the pair's size. It would not have been out of place in Scathach's age. "It extends my range considerably, though I miss the finer details."

"Impressive," Scathach did not give empty praise. She had seen hundreds of abilities in her long life, thousands of different battle styles, and tens of thousands of battles. She had trained some of the world's greatest heroes and even gotten strong enough to kill her own death when it came for her. While Glynda was nowhere near the strongest of beings she had seen, few abilities were as deceptively simple and versatile as her Semblance. Simply amplifying her range from tens of metres to kilometres was enough to multiply her threat potential exponentially.

"I cannot take all the credit," both teachers continued their quick pace northward, leaving the animal behind. There was no need to kill it; they had enough food. "These 'Talents' have made all training easier. My Aura is larger. You all are picking up its use faster than even my best students. It almost feels unfair."

"There is no such thing as unfair. The talented can die just as quickly as those without. Talent is an accelerant, an advantage one has to use and is no guarantee of

victory." Setanta had been talented, but he had still died young. Scathach had outlived every one of her students, many of whom were more talented than she had been.

"I know," Glynda replied simply, looking pained. The Huntress hadn't been a teacher for as long as her, barely a decade, but Scathach was sure she had lost students. That was the peril and the burden of teaching warriors.

"Mikael needs all the help he can get."

"He does," the mention of their mutual student seemed to shake the melancholy from the air. It was best to not dwell on the past. "I can barely imagine a world he describes. One without Grimm. Even civilians need to know basic combat and evacuation techniques where I am from. Such a peaceful world seems idyllic."

"It wasn't completely peaceful," Scathach pointed out. "If it was anything like the modern society of my Human History, then there were plenty of conflicts."

"I'm sure there was, but it was a distant thing. No ever-present threat of extinction. His most significant concern before now was securing his livelihood."

"It showed," She couldn't help but say, her mouth curving slightly. "First drill I had Mikael go through, he tripped over his feet."

"I tried to have him do some basic sword swings, get an eye for his form, and he cut himself." Glynda looked equally amused, a slight smirk on her face.

"First time he held a spear, he impaled his own foot."

Out of the ten women summoned to this island, the pair felt most comfortable with each other's presence. Raven, Emma, and Medea remained private people, sticking primarily to their rooms or workshops. After only a few weeks, Robin, Yoruichi, and Tsunade were practically inseparable, doing everything together. Diana and Artoria were much the same, talking, sparring, and generally spending time together. While there were no severe conflicts among the women, and many freely interacted with each other, their little cliques had formed naturally.

Glynda and Scathach were perhaps the most similar of any women summoned. They were women of few words, teachers of heroes, highly competent in their field, and extremely beautiful like all women on the island. The most significant difference was Glynda's 195cm height towering over Scathach's petite 162cm frame. Nevertheless, if either of their students ever met the other, they would run to the hills screaming.

The pair continued to exchange stories of their student's more amusing mistakes. That transitioned to telling about their respective experiences teaching. Time passed as quickly as the distance they travelled. They made it to the island's northernmost point well before the sunset.

"Bigger than Skye, about two-thirds of Scotland, I believe," Scathach reported as

Glynda made notes to their map.

“I do not know the exact size of your homeland, but Medea’s little creation is calculating the area at about 60 thousand kilometres. A bit more if you consider the mountains.” The witch had asked them to plant small items in the ground, looking like bones or teeth, at the extremity of the island. It was to aide in scrying, as far as Scathach could tell. Though there had been talk about setting up a bounded field, the lancer did not know how Medea would go about powering such a huge barrier.

“The wildlife is changing as well, have you noticed?”

“I have.” Glynda nodded as she put away the bag holding Medea’s creation. “When we left, there was the occasional boar, giant rats, and some birds and wild dogs. I suppose I should not be surprised that there are large felines either.”

The creature that had tried to stalk the pair for the last few minutes was a cat in only the loosest of senses. It looked like someone had taken a house cat, given it enough steroids for an entire sports team, and then turned all its fur into deadly spikes.

It lasted less than a second against Scathach’s cursed spear. Glynda was levitating it to bring it back to Medea to study.

“I did not see any markings of territory, did you?”

“I do not believe they are native to the island. I have suddenly felt animals appear in my senses since we started exploring. I initially thought it to be due to my unfamiliarity with Haki, but this creature teleported within one hundred feet of us from nowhere near. I believe they are spawning from nowhere.”

“If so, they are getting more dangerous. While no threat, this cat was worse than the dogs and boars. The island could be escalating.”

“I will ask Medea, Robin, and Raven. They seem to be the most knowledgeable about the island. Can I trouble you to ask Mikael upon your next summoning? I was called last night, and I would rather not wait three more days if he has the answers.”

“Of course,” the ruler of the land of shadows nodded amiably. She actually was hopeful more dangerous creatures would appear. It would make life on the island more enjoyable. “On the subject of our summoner, I have intended to ask; would you like to go first or second?”

“Hm? First or second?”

“To lay with him, of course.” The taller blonde, stern and composed, stumbled on her heeled boot. The levitating bag and body dipped, almost hitting the jungle floor. Glynda barely managed to not fall on her face. She regained her balance in a moment.

“Excuse me!?” She shouted as her face flushed red. A flock of ravens flew from the nearby trees at the loud sound.

“To lay with him.” The veiled woman repeated. “I intend to do so at the earliest convenience. I have no preference for order. If you preferred to go first, I would not be opposed.” The taller blonde continued to stare at her friend, red-faced and stammering.

“You-you, with him?” She stuttered.

“Of course, if you would like us both to do so simultaneously, I believe we will overwhelm him if it is the first time. Perhaps the third or fourth then.” The celt persisted.

“How improper! With your own student?!” The blonde finally managed to gather her thoughts. She looked scandalized at the idea, though Scathach noticed her eyes were also a bit glassy in imagination.

“You have never laid with one of your students?” The Servant couldn’t help but ask, shocked in her own way. While she hadn’t slept with most of her students, not even Setanta, it was not a rare occurrence. One of them had even been the father of her daughter, not that they had ever met.

“Of course not!” Glynda snapped out of her thoughts, though fantasies might be a better term. “It would be a gross violation of my duty as a teacher. Entirely inappropriate.”

“How odd.” It must be a difference in culture. Scathach did not have the Grail to provide insight into her companion’s world, so their society might have been utterly alien to her. Why had a difference only come up now, though? “I admit, I am looking forward to testing out that perk of his when we can interact physically. Sticky fingers, I believe it was called. Have you never thought about it? Even once? Yoruichi bragged considerably about what she planned to do with him. I have caught Artoria daydreaming about him more than once, though she refuses to admit it.”

“It has crossed my mind,” Glynda admitted hesitantly before immediately retreating. “But it would be completely inappropriate, as I said. As teachers, we have a duty to guide our students. To take advantage of our charge would be wrong.”

“Why? It is not as if he is young. I believe your students, like mine, were old enough to be making a decision for themselves.” Scathach was genuinely curious about this foreign concept. Was there a reason or simply propriety holding people back?

“I mean, it’s just wrong.” The Huntress stuttered out. “Besides, how would that even work?”

“Like any other sort of sex, I imagine.” Scathach deadpanned. “I hope with more orgasms than most, I admit. Some of my students required much instruction to reach the bare minimum.” As Glynda remained stonefaced, though red, the Lord of Spirits started to suspect a different issue was the problem. “You have laid with a man before, right?”

The silence was her answer.

The Servant let out a tinkling laugh. “Apologies, I mean not to mock you. Where I

come from, you would have suitors knocking down the walls of your hall for your hand."

"It isn't as if I had much choice," Glynda grumbled as she walked away. Scathact matched her pace, still chuckling. "I was the only one keeping Beacon together, leaving little time for romance. And the man I was fond of turned out to be a monster in the end."

"We will have to fix that then." The Queen of the Land of Shadows stopped laughing, deciding to bring the subject to a brighter topic. "Before Mikael drops you off at home. I will be with you the entire way, much like I was for my daughter's first time."

"Can we please drop the subject?" The blonde sighed in resignation.

"Very well," she complied, but not before getting one last word in. "If the perk is all it is hyped up to be, I fear we will ruin you for anyone in your homeworld."

"You still intend to ask to travel with Mikael?" Glynda asked, desperate to end the teasing.

"I do."

"He has made no secret that he intends to bring us home and leave us there. How do you intend to convince him to take you with him?"

"I call it the 'Friendship of Thighs.'" She tried to stop the words from forming. She really did. But Glynda had given her the perfect opening. The stink-eye she received was worth it. "I suspect that it will not take too much convincing. He has kept cards close to his chest, but I suspect he is a bit of a pushover when it comes to us. He regrets dragging us into this mess, even if it wasn't by his design."

"I am not certain about that," Glynda shook her head. "While he has engaged us with good faith, Mikeal has repeatedly expressed he intends to leave us all behind. Not just to me but to all the other women as well. He is never rude or cruel about it, but any guilt he feels for us is tempered by his own situation. Something has set him against our further presence in his life."

"Emma knows what that reason is." Scathach declared with certainty. "She discovered it, and he silenced her with a Command Seal. Despite enjoying the luxury the mansion has to offer more than any of the others, she is the most desperate to be free of it and our summoner."

"Raven might know as well," Glynda agreed. "She always returns from their conversations introspective. I overheard her talking with Diana about her empathetic abilities. She claimed that Mikael was no threat to us. She seemed absolutely certain of this fact."

"Good, convincing him will be easier than expected." Scathach was not going to accept any other outcome. She would not allow herself to be returned to the Land of Shadows. Either Mikael would take her with him, or he would kill her.

There was no third option.

*****

“Gah!” Mikael cried, whip-like vines slashing at his hand. He did not drop his halberd and managed to swing it at his foe. It passed through his opponent quickly, and the enchanted blade tip ignited the foliage as it severed the top of the monster from its bottom. One down, six more to go. Two of which remained hidden in the brush.

Scathach watched it all with an appraising eye. Her pupil had improved tremendously since she first met him as a decrepit old man in a cell.

She watched him take another blow, a whip to the back.

Of course, he still had a long way to go. He needed to get better at handling multiple opponents. His armour protected him from the worst of the plant monsters but slowed him down considerably. The celt understood that not everyone liked to go to battle naked, but shields and armour were only valuable so long as they did not engender passivity.

One of the creatures, whose legs had been severed and charred, crawled close enough to entangle his ankles. She didn’t alert him, though. It was up to the living to chart their own course. Her nails dug into her palm. She felt her gut clench in fear as he stumbled to the ground. Immaterial as she was, she wouldn’t be able to save him.

He saved himself with a blast of fire from his palm, taking out the group of tree-like beings. As he stumbled to his feet, she saw a line of blood flow from an open wound on his face, an attack that hadn’t been protected by his helmet. She almost felt bad for telling him to battle the group without recourse to his magecraft.

Almost.

“You failed,” Scathach told him as she wandered over. She had remained as distant as possible during the fight to not distract him. He was breathing heavily as he wiped the blood from his face. She noted with pride that he was not collapsing in exhaustion, instead taking the time to stab his weapon into his foes to verify their deaths.

“Sorry, instinct.” He explained. The dark forest did not provide much illumination, but she noted his armour was stained with rust, blood, and sap. His halberd was still charred black but bore no other stain.

“Your pyromancy is potent. The purpose of the exercise was to familiarize yourself with your weapon further. Your insistence on this particular blade will do more harm than good if you cannot leverage it properly.”

“After everything I went through to get this thing, I will learn to use it. It’s the only weapon I’ve found that does not require regular maintenance. I will not have access to Andre all the time.”

“It is powerful,” Scathach agreed. She also agreed with his reasons as proper weapon

care supplies were rare in this ruined world. “But a powerful weapon can be a greater foe than any beast if it teaches the wrong lessons.”

“I know.” Finished verifying his kills, he surveyed the forest. She saw his eyes lingered on the bush creatures that remained hidden. He approached them casually, even as he continued to talk to her. “I need all the help I can get. It is entirely different from using a sword. I think I will try without the shield. It should improve my balance. I am not leaving the Garden until I can defeat Havel.”

As the vine monsters jumped from the dirt in an ambush, Mikael swept the blade through them both. Flames licked them as they fell apart.

“Tell me of this foe. Why is a target of your enmity?”

“He’s not, not really. Much like most things in this world, he is hollow. An undead that has lost his mind and soul to madness. When he was alive, he was a fearsome dragonslayer. A hero. His primary weapon is a club made out of a dragon’s tooth. His armour was so strong they called him The Rock. I am not sure if the man in that tower is Havel himself, an imitator, or somebody who has possession of his gear. If I cannot defeat him, I stand no chance against later enemies.”

“I would not have you die because you challenged a legend too soon.” The Servant kept her voice stern, though fear crept up her spine. Mikael was not allowed to die, not when she finally had hope. “You are growing quickly, and challenges will help you progress, but all growth will end if you die.” She could not remember the last time she had felt fear, but she controlled it rather than letting it control her.

“I promise I won’t die.” Taking a seat on a log, he smirked up at her. A joke she was unaware of in his smile. “But Havel isn’t even the worst threat in these woods. The hydra will be worse.”

“A hydra?” She perked up, her hands aching for a spear. She had never had the pleasure of hunting one of those beasts, though legends of them had reached even her home in Scotland.

“It doesn’t have the regeneration like the one from myth, but yes. A nine-headed one is in the basin’s lake. It stands between the princess trapped in crystal and me. I will need to slay it to rescue her.”

“A knight in shining armour, are you?”

“No,” he shook his head with a chuckle. “She will be able to teach me some beneficial spells. They will make my life much easier later.”

“Then I wish you a good hunt. On the subject, do you know why animals appear on the island? When we first arrived, it was barren of life but us. Since then, we have met all sorts of beasts. Glynda will be asking Medea, but you might have an answer for us.”

“Sounds like the ‘Creature Feature’,” He looked at her in interest. “It was an optional pick in the catalogue. It populates the demi-plane with any creature I encounter under a certain tier. Level Six, I believe. What animals have you met?” Scathach listed all the ones she was are of, even the cat-like monstrosity she had slain not an hour ago. “I ran into those creatures not too long ago.” He grimaced, rubbing his chest in phantom pain. “I did not manage to kill one, so just meeting them is enough for copies to appear on the island.”

“Does this mean the Hydra will appear as well?” She tried to keep the hope from her voice. Judging from his amused glance, she failed.

“It should. If I remember correctly, it shouldn’t be strong enough to count as tier 6, and anything below that and non-sapient should fall under the category of ‘creature’. I’ve forgotten most of the finer details of the catalogue. It has been too long.”

“I shall alert the others,” after hunting one down for herself, of course.

“Has a drake appeared?” She shook her head in denial. “Then either I need to touch the creature, or dragons are too high tier to count. Those and the Moonlight Butterfly are the only other ‘Creatures’ I expect to encounter. If any of you see them, let me know. Now that I think about it, there might be some wolves too.”

“Medea will be happy with fresh materials, though I worry for the mansion if we must fend off dragons.” It sounded like more fun than she had in millennia.

“Sorry,” he shrugged his shoulder in helplessness. “I can’t avoid facing them myself. If I had known this would happen, I would have bought Creature Defence. Like everything else on the island, I hadn’t been able to buy the Creature Feature, so I didn’t expect it to be relevant.”

“We will be able to handle it.” She waved off his concerns. It was not the place for the student to worry about their teachers. There were a few minutes of companionable silence as he used a ragged cloth to wipe down his armour from the worst of its sticky remnants.

“I’m sorry.” He eventually said, not looking at her.

“About?” She asked, not sure for what he was apologizing. In her experience, Mikael was an intelligent man. His mind worked fast, sometimes too fast for others to keep up with, and he would start on subjects out of nowhere with very little connecting thread.

“Summoning you.” He explained.

“Do not be. You had little control of the situation and are no more responsible for this than anyone else.”

“Not that.” He shook his head, finally looking her in the eyes. “I am not guilty of that. It was not my choice to actually summon any of you to that island. I can only control my own actions, not the world. I am not sorry for any of the others, the situation is unfortunate, but by the end, they will have a short vacation and go home with some nifty

abilities. I apologize to you because you are the only one I have wronged."

"In what manner have you wronged me?" As far as she was aware, there was no such thing.

"I would be dropping everyone off at their own home in that story. Since it was only a short piece, I hand waived many issues away. You were one of them. Everyone else has somewhere to return to or would like the benefits of immortality to achieve their goals. By choosing you, I condemned you to the worst experience possible." He looked genuinely regretful.

"You were aware of my wish?" She asked, heart clenched. "To face a foe able to slay me in battle?"

"I was. With Warranty Plan, that is no longer possible. You were eternal before. Now, you are genuinely immortal so long as I live. And as sorry as I am for you, I have no intention of dying. So I am sorry that I chose you despite knowing your wish. I am even more sorry that I am not selfless enough to free you from your eternal prison. But I am not sorry that you were summoned. I do not regret meeting any of you." Indeed, she had a most selfish pupil.

Scathach laughed.

Mikael stared.

"I accept your apology, misguided and backhanded though it is." The Servant felt she should explain. He was looking a bit hurt that she laughed at his heartfelt words. "You know my wish, but you not the reasons behind it?"

"Not exactly," he shook his head. "All my knowledge of any of you women was filtered through different media. It never painted a complete picture, only hinted at parts. I know you mainly from a game with multiple servants; you were only one of the hundreds. You had explicitly stated your wish on the Grail but not the reasons as far as I can remember. Piecing things together, I thought it was due to simply being weary of life after millennia. I guess I was wrong."

"No, you were correct. But you missed the heart with your thrust."

"Then please teach me Shishou." He finally smiled at her once more, though why he continued to call her that, she did not know.

"I was weary of life because it had left me behind. There were no foes left to face. No heroes left to train. All my pupils and my family were long dead. The Land of Shadows had retreated to Reverse Side. It needed not a guardian anymore. I waited in solitude for longer than most civilizations exist. Before I awoke on the island, I sat in my castle of Skye. I had not moved a muscle in centuries."

"So it was the solitude that was the problem?"

“It was the despair.” She clarified. “Had I companions, it would have been easier, but still, my wish would be the same. I would never be summoned as a servant without the world ending because I would never die. There was nothing new in the world, no path left untread. You did not just give me new companions as immortal as myself or a new student when you summoned me. You promised me a multiverse of foes to face. Experiences I have never conceived of. You told me I would get to face a Hydra not ten minutes ago. Did you know Diana lives in a world where space travel is standard? That Yoruichi hails from a land of the dead entirely different from my own? You did not shackle me to continue living. You provided the one thing I have yearned for in my long life. Hope.”

He took a moment to digest her impassioned words. She turned her eyes away from his smiling face, embarrassed by her excitement. It was unbecoming of his teacher.

“I am happy for you then. I was worried about dropping you off once we are free. Think about where you would like to go, and I will bring you with any of the others before I leave.”

“No.” Scathach declared with finality, looking him in the eye. “Once we are free, I will accompany you on your travels. I will experience everything personally, not be left behind like a new bride. By the end of your training, anything able to slay you will be able to do the same to me. No matter what, I will have achieved my wish.”

“No,” Mikael responded just as firmly, no longer smiling. “If you do not wish to be dropped off with the others, very well. I will find a world you will enjoy, but I will not have anyone of you accompany me longer than necessary.”

The pair maintained a glaring contest for moments, neither willing to bend.

“We will see,” the Lord of Spirits eventually said. “Till then, learn to use that Black Halberd. I would face that hydra as soon as possible. Do not keep me waiting.”

Not giving him a chance to respond, she disappeared to the island’s jungle, where Glynda awaited her.

Once they could interact physically, Scathach would break Mikael’s hips.

Author's Note:

So, bad news/ good news.

The bad news is I lost my job due to company shut down. Which sucks since it was an awesome job.

Good news is, while I look for another I will have more time to write thus you are getting updates earlier.

About this chapter; a bit of a time skip but the prologue is going to go on so long even with the jumping that I am not too worried.

Scathach is an intersting challenge to write, she is taciturn and serious which make dialogue a problem. She is slightly playful, at least in FGO events if not the main story so I hoped I brought that accross. She also comes from a culture where sex isn't nearly as taboo as others, so I think her being open about it is appropriate. With regards to Cu, canonicaly its stated that she does see him as a man but would rather he see her as a teacher than a woman. I took this to mean they never had sex, though he did marry her daughter and have a child with Aife, her sister.

Glynda is whole other kettle of fish. RWBY is a clusterfuck of characterizations, if some get any at all. From what little we see of Goodwitch, she is a stern taskmaster. She cares deeply for her students and will be strict with them to see them succeed. The virgin thing was something that came about as I was writting. Its hinted at a possible romance with Ironwood in the third season but, like a lot of things in that show, never went anywhere.

For those curious, yes. 'Don't stand so close to me' was one of the lures purchase so both of them were very susceptible to it after all this time. As guessed in the comments, I chose 'No Bindings'. While mind control is fine fetish wise and for role play, its actual implications in a real world sense make me nauseous. I'll read it, but I won't write it.

I appreciate all the feedback I have received and all the comments. Please keep it up.

Man the Celts were weird.

For those unaware, the reason the celts in Fate where jumpsuits is to represent nakedness. They would go into battle wearing only paint. I imagine this was due to the limited availability of metals to make armour but it also would lead to a bit of disdain for it in my mind.

After a bit of time skip, we are at Darkroot Garden.

The build is coming together. With the Black Knight Halberd, Pyromancy, some Sorceries, and Med/Heavy armour. While Mikael is not me, I do try and write him as if he were. To that end, if I were trapped in Dark Souls I would use every tool I could. I wouldn't use sorceries for combat, since they require switching between weapons but their utilities are undeniable. Pyromancies, despite being an 'Item' in DS are, lore-wise, an internal ability and thus do not need a 'Glove'.

How would you go about it?

As always, I guarantee another half chapter by Monday, though I might have one earlier. I am expecting to finish part 1 of the prologue in about 3 more full chapters and then it is on to part 2.

Q: If you mean how would the Pyromancy Flame work? I've seen it described as a "seed" made from the flame that is kinda "torn" by the master and implant into the student via a handshake or like a hand on their chest. While also kinda explaining how special and symbolic it is the "share the flame" or whatever. If you don't mean that? I have no idea

A: That is pretty similar to my reading of it.

I was asking 'If trapped in dark souls; What do you think your build would end up looking like? And why?'

For example, as mentioned in the chapter Mikael went after the Black Knight Halberd because it was sturdy, has a minor enchantment and (not stated in chapter) he is kind of a coward who if forced to fight would prefer to keep as much distance as possible. Though he knows he has to fight close so is learning all he can from the teachers he has available.

CONFINEMENT IV

I felt an angel's tepid tears, fall softly next to mine
And knew that as those tears did dry, a new day would be mine

"To win, you must hunt five creatures," Raven said as she hung in the air in front of the competitors.

They had chosen her to be the judge for three reasons. First of all, she was impartial. While familiar with Diana before their summoning, the Cambion hadn't spent more time with the Amazon than anyone else. The second reason was that, with her magic, Raven could teleport wherever she needed to keep an eye on the competition.

The third reason was that they wanted to bring her out of her room and interact with the others. While she could feel and appreciate their intentions, it did not change that she still had a long way to go before making sense of all her new abilities.

"A tree lizard, a moonlight butterfly, a lightning drake, a crystal lizard, and one hydra head," Raven explained monotonously. All four competitors remained poised to launch. Yoruichi was on all fours, Diana and Scathach were ready to sprint, and Artoria had Dun Stallion poised to charge. "Arriving back first will give you two points, one less for every position after. Cutting more than one Hydra head will lose you three points per head. Flying is allowed. Fighting each other is not. Anyone caught doing so loses. If you want to fight, do it later. Keep all the bodies as intact as possible in the pouches Medea provided. No need to waste the materials."

Medea stopped disassembling the massive Hydra to watch the start of the race. If Raven was a bitter woman, she would be cursing Scathach and Mikael for starting this absurd competition. Some of the other women had been jealous of the Celt's trophy when she arrived after breakfast had finished, dragging the massive carcass behind her. When told there was another somewhere on the Island, there had almost been a fight over who would get the first crack at it.

Azarath save her from muscle heads.

It had been decided to settle it with a hunt for the hardest-to-find and challenging to hunt creatures on the Island. The winner got to fight the Hydra after it healed. Scathach was participating for the fun of it. She could feel the group's bloodlust, excitement, and enjoyment. She could also feel Medea's amusement at the entire situation.

"Ready to eat my dust, ladies?" Yoruichi taunted playfully.

"I have not lost a hunt since I was a child when Artemis blessed me," Diana replied

good-naturedly. “I do not plan to start now.” Scathach remained focused, not moving a muscle before the signal.

Artoria’s response was to summon a lion. The creature, made from crackling yellow lightning, towered over the assembled women, almost ten feet tall. It released a roar that shook Raven’s bones. Out of all the women there, the female version of King Arthur was the most competitive. The half-demon could feel her emotions, solid and implacable.

Raven hoped this didn’t end badly.

“Go.” She said, not counting down.

The competitors took off, Yoruichi and Diana flying towards the mountain range, home of the drakes and crystal lizards. Artoria rode Dun Stallion into the air, the lion following her as she headed towards the northeastern sector and the Hydra. Scathach disappeared into the jungle’s foliage.

Raven floated down to the ground. She spread her senses wide, the mansion’s shadows lengthening to wrap around her.

“Azarath. Metrion. Zinthos.” She chanted, four shadow ravens forming around her before disappearing into the aether. They attached themselves to the four competing women’s shadows. Before appearing on the Island, one raven would have been her limit. Now she barely felt strained.

“Are you sure I cannot tempt you to spend an afternoon in my workshop?” Medea asked, even as she separated fangs from one of the Hydra’s mouths. Scathach had brought the beast back four hours ago. The witch had been working non-stop to disassemble it. Even with her practiced hand, magic to aid her, and non-stop efforts, she still had three heads left. “I am sure we can learn a lot from each other.”

“Thank you,” Raven replied softly, most of her attention on the competitors. Diana had already slain a drake and searched for one of the elusive crystal lizards. Yoruichi had found one, pocketed it, and headed towards the peaks for a drake of her own. Scathach had discovered a nest of the tree lizards. Artoria hadn’t yet reached the Hydra, it being the farthest creature. “I will decline for now.”

“Are you sure?” The witch asked. “Our systems are different. We won’t be able to replicate our same spells, but inspiration is more important than anything else when learning magic.” Raven had learned to distrust other mages when they were too helpful. Her paranoia was offset by the emotions radiating from the older witch.

In the two months the group had been trapped, Medea had gone from the most distrustful of the group to the most content. Her physical changes were almost as drastic. She had worn a cloak like Raven when she had first arrived, her figure hunched and skulking about as she tried to remain unnoticed.

Raven hadn't seen that cloak in weeks.

Now the greek witch was always wearing pretty dresses, her hair free and flowing. When she wasn't in her workshop, she made dioramas and clothes in one of the unused rooms. She was always smiling, and (Raven would swear this was true) she had even seen the bluenette's pointed ears wiggle in joy at one point when she managed to get Artoria to wear a dress of her own.

"Why?" The question leaked out of her mouth without her intention.

"Hm?" Pausing in her actions, the older witch looked over at the goth. Even after hours of work, Medea remained as pristinely clean as this morning. She did not look like someone with her arms deep in a snake's brain. She looked like a housewife.

"Why are you so happy?" Raven decided to ask her question, ignoring her embarrassment with practiced ease. "We have been trapped for two months. Our only hope for escape is some guy we do not even know. I do not understand how you could be enjoying it so much."

"I suppose it is a bit odd from an outside perspective," She acknowledged.

"You hate Diana but like Artoria. You keep making things, even if they aren't useful. You even cook breakfast for everyone. Why?" Raven had spent the last few months trying to regain her equilibrium after expanding her abilities. Her emotions did not need to be as controlled as when she was younger, but if they grew too strong with her new powers, they could wreck cities. She had always been introverted, but it left her disconnected from her fellow women.

"I do not hate Diana. I hate the gods." At the mention of the deities, Raven felt Medea's emotions boil in rage. "Being near someone blessed by Aphrodite brings bad memories. At least she's not a blond-haired pretty boy." A wealth of dark emotions welled up. Genuine hate. Cruel malice. Blood-thirst. So strong that if Raven had been younger, they would have overwhelmed her. Now they barely made Pride twitch.

"You have not answered my question." Raven pointed out.

"I suppose I am happy because things are good." The witch looked thoughtful as if choosing her words carefully. "You remember my explanation of the Grail War? Had I won one, my wish would have been to live again without the gods able to manipulate my fate. To love who I wished, somebody who accepted me. Thanks to the defences the summoning provided, I am forever free of them. Being trapped here isn't bad either. I have enough material to work with, some I've never had the chance to use before. My craft is advancing well. I have time for my hobbies. It reminds me of my time with my aunt Circe on her Island."

The familiar name shot a feeling of fear into Raven with all its connotations. Medea

must have caught something because she gave the younger woman a sympathetic look.

“Diana has explained about your world’s version of my aunt. If you ever meet her, your stomach is in more danger than you are. Her kykeon is very good, but she is too fond of it. I will make some tomorrow.” She looked wistful, nostalgia radiating from her. “She would hate it here. Being trapped on another island would drive her to moult.”

“And Mikael?” Raven carefully took note of all the emotions Medea went through. There was joy, fondness, exasperation, interest, and most damning of all, hints of love.

That was bad.

“Our Master is a good one. I’ve been summoned by much worse before.” Medea said diplomatically, her emotions not reflected on her smiling face.

“I know Yoruichi and Scathach are planning on sleeping with him at the first chance they get,” Raven said bluntly, warning the older woman. Medea’s emotions did not change.

“Is that so? Good for them.” She said plainly. Raven’s emotional manipulation did not work on any of the other women on the Island, so she continued the hard way. Based on Medea’s legend, jealousy should be enough to keep her away from Mikael.

“Glynda is also developing a crush.” Nothing. The greek kept up her work, though she nodded that she had heard. Damn, time to escalate. “Artoria is in love with him.”

Medea froze, shock radiating from her.

Raven was exaggerating a bit. She had felt the beginning of love from the knight like the greek, but it wasn’t to a significant extent yet. Artoria was a bit too naive to recognize that sort of emotion. Medea, though, had gone from shocked to radiating lust and hope?

“Tell me everything!” The older witch shook Raven by her cloak, almost teleporting to her side. Based on the broad smile on her face, Raven might have miscalculated. Was that drool?

The former titan was saved from having to answer by Diana’s return. It had been only a few minutes since the start of the competition. The amazon skidded to a halt at the base of the hill, dirt trailing in her wake. Not even a second later, Yoruichi landed with a curse.

“So close!” The dark-skinned woman stomped her feet in frustration, though Raven could feel it was partly feigned.

“Artemis’ blessing is responsible for the victory,” Diana tried to be humble, but her smile didn’t diminish. Medea’s irritation spiked at the name, but she ignored it to keep staring at Raven. She wasn’t out of this yet.

“Excuse me,” the Cambion said as she phased through the woman. “I have to judge the results.”

“We’ll talk later.” The greek promised before returning to her disassembly.

Raven floated over to the arguing pair.

“Size is irrelevant,” the Amazon argued. The pair had laid out their prey in the field. Diana’s beasts bore apparent blade wounds. A smooth cut separated the base of the hydra neck. The shinigami’s looked beaten. She had torn the Hydra’s head off.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Yoruichi said playfully. Her drake was a good foot longer. “I like them big myself.” Diana rolled her eyes but smiled. Raven reviewed the report from her soul constructs. Neither of them had broken the rules.

“Diana wins.” She reported dryly, ready to be done with this and get back to her meditation.

“Thank you, do you know where the others are?” Wonder Woman only felt slightly smug. She likely wanted to rub it into her friend’s competitive face.

Raven reached out to her remaining soul constructs. Scathach had gotten sidetracked; she had found a horde of huge-eyed lizards. They spewed a black fog that turned the surrounding forest to stone. She was finishing up now and would be returning in a few minutes.

Artoria was in the air, seconds from arriving. She, too, had been delayed by a new arrival on the Island. Though she had lost the contest, Raven could feel her happiness. Her lion companion was dragging her trophy behind.

Oh. Oh, dear.

A shadow covered the assembled women, and they all moved out of the way as a carcass fell in front of them, kicking up dirt and shaking the ground.

“It attacked me as I flew over the mountains. Sir Ywain’s lion acquitted itself most well and felled it with little difficulty. I imagine it is worth ‘bonus points’.” Raven did not need to pay attention to Medea to know that she was the one squealing in delight. Whether for the enormous amount of new material or the sight of Artiora standing atop the great red body of the massive drake.

Somebody so deadly should not be able to look so adorably smug.

Really, what sort of enemies was Mikael facing.

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Raven handled the disorientating displacement from the summoning with practice ease. When she sensed it coming, she closed her eyes. It helped with vertigo.

When she opened them, the sight before her stole her breath.

The warm evening sun shone on the most majestic city she had ever seen. Great gothic spires and cathedrals spread out before her, built-in ways and sizes no mortals

could ever create. Detailed reliefs splayed out on every single one of the massive glass windows. They depicted scenes of combat, beauty, and a host of other images. Too many to count.

Long walkways, stone bulwarks, intricate reliefs, twisting balustrades.

Raven had been lucky enough to visit Milan once and see the magnificent Il Duomo, renowned for its intricacy, detail, and beauty.

The least of the buildings surrounding her made it look like a shack.

It went on for miles, disappearing into the horizon. Clouds floated by, close enough to touch, giving the scene a heavenly air. The city below the cliff had been massive too, but it had been ramshackle. Sprung up organically over the process of the millennium. It had crowded the cliff base as if the buildings themselves were trying to climb it.

Raven could understand if this is what lay at the top.

This was an architect's dream city, made for giants and deities.

Mikael sat beside her, legs dangling from the edge of their balcony. He paid no attention to the kilometre-long drop below him, entranced by the sight. He was looking away from her, for which she was glad.

"Welcome to Anor Londo. City of Gods." He gestured grandly to the vision before him. "Most beautiful sight this world has to offer."

"It is an illusion," Raven replied in a monotone. Now that she had recovered from her shock, she could sense the magic in the air.

"The sun is," he corrected. "The city itself is real. But the sun, the symbol of the power of the chief deity, has been gone for a long time. A facade created by the last god. It is a desperate attempt to keep the masses unaware and uncaring that the world is ending and the gods have abandoned them. Makes you wonder what it would look like at its peak?"

For a moment, nostalgia and wistfulness were his most prominent emotions. Then the surging torrents returned. Raven focused, trying to maintain control. To not be drowned. Sometimes the quality of the feeling was more dangerous than the number of people feeling it.

And Mikael was Dangerous.

"We found the red drake." She said in place of anything better. She felt pride well up within him before it too was swallowed by the swells.

"The Hellkite Drake? Who killed it?" He asked, still not looking at her. He knew about her empathy, and Raven appreciated his steps to make things easier. He was still dangerous, even if he wasn't malevolent.

"Artoria." He barked out a laugh, bemusement radiating from him.

"The red dragon wouldn't stand for competitors, I see." The least damning of his two

emotions grew, and Raven felt it swelling within her own breasts. She took a deep breath to stifle the smile threatening to grow on her face.

If he only felt overwhelming love for them, he wouldn't be so Dangerous. It would have been sweet, in an ironic sort of way.

As Mikael recognized the love he was feeling, it was stifled.

Then the rage came.

At once calm and cold as it was burning hot on Raven's senses. It was all she could do to stop herself from teleporting away. She still flinched, instincts warning her to flee. The Cambion did her best to ignore them.

She knew he would never hurt her, with the same certainty she knew her name. It did not matter to her senses. All she could feel was the rage, the all-consuming hatred.

She had only felt something comparable from her father.

"Sorry," Mikael said. Both the love and the rage were once more contained. Ever present, always at the edge of her senses, but distant and controlled. More than anything else, it was that control that Raven admired. She had fought for something like that for her entire life.

"It is alright." She sat beside him, deciding to enjoy the sight for its worth. "Emotions are what they are. It is what we do with them that matters."

"Still, it's not your fault. I shouldn't take it out on any of you."

"It is not yours either. None of us chose this. We are all trying to make the most of it." Her voice was monotone, but she tried to convey sympathy to him. He must have felt something as the tension eased from his body. Only slightly, though. He was never truly relaxed.

"I'm planning on showing the rest of them this sight, so I would appreciate it if you could keep it a secret."

"Sure," Raven agreed readily before pausing in indecision. Finally, she decided that he deserved to know. "They are starting to love you, you know."

"It's the lures," she could feel his grimace without seeing it. "Glynda and Scathach have taught me a lot one-on-one. Yoruichi and Artoria are more susceptible to Dragon Aura, though I do not know why it affects them. You all should be immune. Since I noticed, I've tried to tone it down, but it might be too late."

"Medea?"

"Medea is," he paused as if searching for the best words. "Complicated. I can't tell you everything; they are her secrets. I just happened to fit her 'type'. More than any of the others, she would be the one to empathize with my situation if she knew. It is one of the reasons I've kept it secret. I do not wish to encourage her."

“Flirting with others did not help,” Raven couldn’t help but point out.

“That was before I had any idea about what was going on. I still half thought that you all were delusions. You might be, but I must act as if you are not. Anyway, anything you could do to slow down the effects would be appreciated.”

“I have tried to tell them of each other to warn them off.”

“I doubt that would work,” Mikael snorted. “Many come from cultures where polygamy or a form of it is normal. Some didn’t even have the concept of ‘cheating’ so long as no children were the result. Medea, Diana, Scathach, maybe Tsunade and Yoruichi. I couldn’t say for sure about Robin or Glynda. Either way, none would back down if they considered it a challenge. Their pride wouldn’t let them.”

“That has been my experience, yes.” Raven decided to not tell him how excited Medea had become at the idea of Artoria liking him. She had immediately sealed herself in her hobby room, giggling perversely and muttering about ‘costumes’. “What about Emma?”

“Emma is an exception to a lot of things.”

“Is that why you used a command seal on her?” She had never gotten a proper response to that question.

“One of them. I had hoped her powers wouldn’t work on any of us. Some of the defences were exactly made against people like her. I found out I was wrong. None of the defences are working. It had been too late to mitigate by that point without resorting to drastic measures. It pissed her off, but information can be more dangerous than power.” He paused, thinking over his words. “This whole situation is messed up. I initially thought I got none of the benefits of the catalogue, but I was wrong about that too. None of the defences, some of the talents, and every lure are active. I’ve gotten a few of the dragon’ ‘gifts’, but not all. I hope things will be more apparent once I’m done with this world.” Raven noticed he still did not tell her what he had Commanded. He also changed the topic rather quickly.

“If we’re lucky, it should only be another month at most. I should be getting an item soon that will speed up my travel. I should have been almost done by now, but Manus was a dick.” He grumbled something about time kidnapping under his breath that she did not catch. “Hopefully, I can get that dragon body and drop you all off as quickly as possible.”

“You think they will go for that?” He couldn’t see it, but her eyebrows were raised in disbelief. None of the women on the Island had struck her as the type to let their decisions be made for them.

“They will not have a choice.” He said with finality. “Besides, with only a few months of meeting for a few hours every other day? They will get over it. We barely know each other.” He stood, ready to set off once again. Raven tried to ignore the great sadness those

last few sentences had caused them. “Can you do a few things for me, though?”

“Sure,” she agreed quickly. Sitting around, waiting to be rescued, had never been her favourite past time. Anything she could do to help would be nice.

“Can you let Medea know to have a new library prepared? I’m going to get my hands on a massive amount of books soon, and I would appreciate it if you could help her sort them. Most of them should be magical, so I think you would enjoy them.” Raven grew excited at the thought, though it did not show on her face. The Island’s library was massive, but it was also completely normal, not a grimoire to be found. Magical tomes would help while away the remaining time they spend trapped.

“You found a way to move items to the Island?”

“A while ago,” he nodded. “You guys still can’t touch anything, but I can throw things through the portal so long as they are non-living matter. Once on the other side, you can interact like usual. Anything left on this side disappears when you do, so you still can’t help me. It lets me collect things for later, once I’m free.”

“We still have rooms left over in the cliff. One of them should do for a magical library. It will be well defended.”

“Thanks,” he waved at her as he walked away, heading through an absolutely massive doorway. He knew the moment she called the portal to return to the Island despite never looking at her once since she had been summoned. That was her only explanation for why he called out right before she disappeared. “If someone new shows up on the Island, treat her well, yeah?”

Raven knew she wasn’t the only one who hated when Mikael left her hanging like that.

Author's Note:

foreshadowing intensifies

I just want to remind everyone that all these characters are unreliable narrators. They are puzzling things out as they go along. Blindly gropping for the truth. They will make mistakes, come to the wrong conclusions and learn the wrong lessons sometimes. Everyone has reasons for the things they do, even if those reasons are wrong.

On the discussion of mind control. As Mikael mentioned the lures, though touching on the bassis of mind control, will not change the person themselves. Whereas bindings are literaly fiat-based 'You love me now!' the lures are extra temptations that, with enough will power, can be resisted. It is unlikely but possible. They are a whisper from the devil but not devil's contract. The end might look the same but the process is what matters.

I'm trying to speed things up a bit but this 'Prologue' needs to establish the character dynamic when they enter the 'World'.

In all seriousness, I am only half happy with this chapter. It is shorter than I wanted it to be but I felt I had to show that Mikael is trying to keep interactions to a minimum. I'll have to make it up to Raven later. Her empathic abilites, I feel, are a core to who she is as a character and how she forms her judgment on people. I try and convey how that can be both a good thing and a bad one.

As I mentioned, the characters are still learning about each other and the circumstances that suround them. I try and keep melowdrama and EDGE to a minimum but it is hard to keep a happy tone while trapped in a death world.

Fun fact: I named the story Rapturous Rhapsody because a: I like alliteration and b: 'A rhapsody in music is a one-movement work that is episodic yet integrated, free-flowing in structure, featuring a range of highly contrasted moods, colour, and tonality'. That is the description in Wikipedia and it is what I am going for story telling wise. It also has connotations with epic poetry that will be made clear later.

*I am getting this out early cause I have an interview later, wish me luck. Once more, feedback is appreci*ated.

WORLD EXPLANATION

I feel I should clarify a few things with regards to the dark souls world. It isn't really spoilers and since we have only seen the perspective of the women so far I think it will answer a few questions poping up.

First of all, Mikael's reasons are there. While I, as a writter and fan of dark souls, would love nothing more than to rescue all the waifus who I could, that is not going to happen. As I mentioned in the first chapter, this is not a collect them all style fic. I might write something like that in the furture (far into the future) but this isn't it.

Second of all the world. I am trying to balance lore with the game. The broad strokes remain the same. The two bells and their locations, Sen's fortress and darkroot below. But I have also tried to think things through organically. Realistcally, a city based around a god kingdom would stretch on for tens, if not hundreds, of miles. That means Mikael knows where he needs to go and the broad strokes on how to get there but the exact path is not the same.

Third of all, the DLC. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Mikael rescued Dusk in order to get access to spells that will be usefull later (I am looking at you Tomb of Giants). He had no plans to complete the DLC. He was unaware that lore wise you do not need the lore vessel to enter it. All you need is the pendent found in the archives. Without the lord vessel he couldn't teleport home and thus had to complete it which delayed him. (Incidently I tried to hint at him having already been to the archives during his talk with Raven.)

Finally, progression. Despite the world not working the same way as in the game, Mikael has largly tried to follow the 'beginner' rout in DS1. Remeber, he has never been in a real fight before now and knew nothing of combat. Of course he would try and stack things in his favor as much as possible. Unlike us who can rush towards the lordvessel and make our lives very easy later, he has to worry about getting traped in a place he cannot deal with yet. For those interested in the exact progression, you can find the 'beginner' route here:

https://darksouls.wiki.fextralife.com/Game+Progress+Route

I would also like to thank everyone who had wished me luck with the interview. It went very well and, while I will not know till later, I am hopeful. Also, I continue to guarantee a half chapter every Friday and Monday. More than likely I will have the next

part ready by Wednesday at the latest. This coming one is practically flying onto the page. It is also going directions I did not really expect but am very happy with.

CONFINEMENT V

I felt an angel's silken wings enfold me with pure love
And felt a strength within me grow, a strength sent from above

The first time Priscilla felt the undead's arrival in the painted world, she almost wept in frustration.

Why?

Why could the outside not leave them be in peace?

Did they not understand that this was the only refuge for the discarded and abandoned?

Did they not know that the denizens were no threat and only responded to invasion?

The hybrid felt the intruder as soon as he stepped foot through the painting. Much like others of his kind, he had gorged himself on the souls of others. They permeated his flesh and spirit, blazing like a bonfire to her senses. This one was powerful. The most powerful to have ever invaded.

He was merciless and intense, slaying all who attacked him and growing stronger with every kill. He only fell a few times. The invader would be reborn, curse a bit before calming down and repeat the exact phrase to himself. "Don't you dare go hollow." He would then set off with a grim determination every time he rose, never making the same mistake twice.

The dragon girl felt a pang of sympathy for every one of her neighbours slain, though she knew they would return in a few weeks. They were hollow, so it took them longer to reform than those still blessed with wisdom. Still, they were mortal; thus, undeath's curse would not allow them to perish forever, unlike herself and her kin.

Altogether, the invader was stronger than most. Still not too different than other undead who ventured into her refuge. So long as he did not attack her and simply left, she would not be forced to fight. Priscilla hated fighting.

Then she heard him sing for the first time.

Before Ariamis had completed his work, she had been hidden away in the labyrinthine halls of Anor Londo, not allowed to attend the great gatherings with others of the godly courts. Eons ago, she had heard minstrels and bards in the great theatres. Snippets of music had drifted to her ear, and she had followed them as best she could, invisible to all. She had spied on the greatest musicians the world had to offer.

They paled before this one undead.

He sang when he was alone. He sang while he fought. He sang as he arose from death.

There was no music accompaniment, no instruments baring the clashing of blades.

It was the most beautiful sound Priscilla had ever heard.

He sang of love and loss. He sang of battle and blood. He sang of places she had never heard, using unfamiliar words. He sang in languages she did not know. Rarely did the undead sing the same song twice, though he did have favourites he returned to. Hundreds of songs left him. Unique beats, unknown genres.

The undead knew not of her presence.

It was just him and his music.

Over the weeks he spent exploring the painted world, Priscilla followed him, invisible. It was a guilty pleasure of hers. While she hated the violent invaders, they were also the only new stimulation found in the Painted World. And he made such beautiful music.

But all good things must come to an end. The undead approached the ruined bridge that led to her home, felling the Tower Knight who defended it with ease.

He crossed the threshold fog, the barrier a manifestation of her power that kept the mindless out. She was ready.

“Who art thou? If thou hast misstepped into this world, plunge down from the plank, and hurry home. If thou desire to join our refuge, I would ask you cease your violence with mine neighbours.” Please let that be true. Please let him want to stay. “If thou seekest I, thine desires shall be requited not.” Some undead sought her out specifically. Whether at the urging of the other gods or on their own, the crossbreed did not know.

Priscilla gripped her scythe tightly. Should he choose the path of violence, she would show no mercy. More than one undead had hollowed on the blade of her Lifehunt. Besides, the undead needed no limbs to sing so beautifully. She would take him below to her chambers. Where he would be safe. Forever.

It would be best if he stayed willingly.

The undead stared at her for a few moments, possibly in surprise. Did he not know of her, or was he deciding whether to attack? His armour was damaged from his extensive battles, though she knew he cleaned it regularly. Clad in heavy steel and tattered cloth, he would be an intimidating sight to most, though she towered over him.

He raised his weapon, and she tensed only for him to flip it and drive its blade into the stone below. He then hung his shield on the black halberd’s shaft. Reaching up, he unlatched his helmet and set it onto the pommel. At some point between his last rest at a bonfire and arriving at her gate, he had used a fragment of Humanity to return the illusion of his mortal body.

Priscilla knew not why nor when. She had hurried home to be in a presentable state

for their meeting. She barely had time to brush her hair and tail. Her clothes were still wrinkled, for Gwen's sake! Still, she relaxed a tad as combat did not seem imminent.

"Pardon the intrusion. I am Mikael." the undead spoke, even as he brushed snow from a step and sat down. "Your, uh, neighbours attacked first, and there are not too many friendly faces around. To have found one is a welcome change. Especially one as beautiful as you."

Priscilla knew she could not flush. Her skin remained the pale white of fallen snow. She still fought off the smile that threatened to grow on her face. He was flattering her. She had never been called beautiful before. It was nice.

"Prithee, tell me who thou art? Thou art foreign to this land?" She noticed he had stopped looking up at her, now staring behind her. She turned her head to look at what had caught his attention as subtly as possible.

Her tail had betrayed her.

The traitorous appendage swept back and forth in the snow, clearing an area of stone in its excitement. Clearly, the flattery was more effective than she thought. The crossbreed cleared her throat, drawing the undead's attention back to her face as she focused on keeping her tail still.

"Right, sorry about that." He bowed. Though he spoke as a lowborn, she was pleased he still maintained manners. "I come from a faraway land. Not even the gods have heard about it. Are you familiar with the problems of the outside world?"

"To a degree."

"Time and space are fracturing as the undead curse spreads." He explained. The hybrid actually knew about that. It had begun while she was young still. While she had been sequestered before the worst, the painting acted as both prison and fortress against the worst. "I appeared in the Asylum one day, cursed. Possibly due to the fractures. My companions remain safe but trapped on a faraway island. I seek to free them and learn more about the events leading to my undeath. My path has led me here."

"A noble goal." Though she approved of his motivation, it meant he would not remain here with her. "Thy quest must be harrowing. Why not rest with this one for a time? Thy companions would not begrudge you a repose."

"You've never met them." He chuckled in good humour, but that only soured her more on these distant companions. They did not treasure this Bard as he should be. Not like she would. "I came here searching for help, and then I will be on my way."

"In what manner?" She asked warily. While putting Mikael in her debt would be nice, it was unnecessary.

"As I said, I am cursed to wander while my companions are trapped. I have tested

many things to discover more about the nature of the curse. One thing I have not been able to test requires the aid of a willing participant. I would like to see if I can free you from this prison with your permission."

"Free?" She asked, not comprehending his intent. Though she was put off by all his talk of tests, it reminded her too much of her father. "This one is not imprisoned. Ariamis' work is a refuge, far from strife and violence."

"I should probably explain more," Mikeal pulled out a box, one of those bottomless ones the enchanters liked to create. He rummaged around in it for a moment before removing a familiar doll. "This is what led me here."

"May I?" She asked before he continued, reaching out to the worn object. She hadn't seen it in centuries, a token of her childhood. Emotion welled up in her as the undead passed it to her, though it did not show on her face. For this alone, she would be willing to do almost anything.

"The world outside is ending." The man explained as he put away his box. "It will be reborn eventually, only to end again and again. This cycle will continue. Rise and fall. Until the flame is snuffed out completely. Gwen has doomed the world to eternal twilight and the undead curse in his attempt to continue the age of fire. Should my test succeed, you would escape that fate."

"In what manner?" Priscilla asked as she hugged the doll to her chest. The revelation about Lord Gwen did not surprise her. Even in her short time at his court, she understood well the nature of most gods.

"You would teleport to the Island on which my companions are located. It is a paradise. Their every need is taken care of. You would be trapped with them until I can free them. It is my hope that linking the fire will do so."

"Thou would have me imprisoned?" She asked, though not harshly. "Thou seek to fell the four lords, tis no easy task."

"There would be benefits. My companions would treat you well. The Island is much nicer than this place. You would also receive various blessings. You would grow in power and control. You would be able to make the most delicious food, sing the greatest songs, and never worry about safety again." Though the crossbreed was not tempted by the power or Island, she would be lying if she said she wasn't interested in eating food again. To be able to sing as Mikael, that too would be a prize.

More than anything, the promise of companions almost had her agreeing. Ariamis' world was peaceful but oh so lonely. She had more conversations in the last few minutes than in the centuries hence. Still, from his words, Mikael was unsure of the success of this enterprise.

“I would demand a price of thee first.” She said, trying to imitate the imperious tone some goddesses possessed.

“And that would be?”

“Thou must sing for me.” Mikael was clearly surprised at her words, though he recovered admirably. She fought not to fidget. She had meant to ask for more information, for guarantees of conduct and safety. The words had slipped from her mouth without thought. If Priscilla could blush in shame, she would.

“Sure, though if I am to pay such a steep price, I will demand one of my one.” The humour in his voice eased her worry, though his following words sent a different kind shooting through her. “Let me pet your tail. It’s been too long since I’ve had any floof time, and I am going through withdrawals.”

“Very well, though I demand a song fit for a god.” She kept her scythe in hand, just in case, as she approached his seated form. Her tail betrayed her once more while she raised her robe slightly to sit appropriately. It lay in his lap without command, shaking in excitement.

“Sure,” he agreed easily. His hands started to pet and stroke the sensitive skin on her tail.

Oh.

Oh, gracious, that was nice.

He knew precisely how to stroke the fur below and scratch the scales above. As Priscilla melted into the ground beside him, his hands danced along its length. Then he started to sing, his voice deep and smooth.

“Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
The night is falling
You have come to journey’s end
Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came before
They are calling
From across the distant shore”

A lullaby, how lovely.

It reminded the hybrid of more innocent times. When a kind voice would help ease the pain of loneliness. When the painted world was new and bright. Someone would sing to her from the outside, and they, too, had a beautiful voice.

Her new Bard was superior, and the song was better now. Fit for a goddess.

As his fingers and voice eased her more than ever, lulling her to sleep, Priscilla did not feel the tiny prick of the bite.

******

Conscious returned to Priscilla slowly, dredging her up from the most restful sleep of her life.

She lay on a bed of silver, silken sheets falling from her body like water as she raised herself to sit on the side of the bed. Someone had stripped her bare. She hoped it hadn't been Mikael. She would hate to reveal her disgusting form to her Bard's eyes.

Standing, the crossbreed evaluated this new prison.

It was of a size with her own room in Ariamis' Painting, though much better appointed. Strange creations were against the far wall, metal and crystal rectangles. Television and consols she somehow knew. Bookshelves lined one wall, filled with innumerable thin books. Two doors lay to her left, both appropriately sized, while a smaller one was to her right. Dark drapes covered the windows beside her bed.

The first door on the left revealed a lavatory. It, too, was well-appointed. Priscilla did not understand the strange shapes and symbols. She understood the large tub was to be filled with water for bathing, and the smaller ones were to be used to wash her hands. The hybrid would have to ask the staff of this residence to bring some hot water at the earliest convenience. She could not remember the last time she had a warm bath.

The second door of her size was a closet filled with clothes well-tailored to her diminutive size. She appreciated the thoughtfulness of it, well aware of how difficult it was to work with such minuscule proportions. Not knowing the temperature or environment of the area, she chose to don a robe similar to the one she wore in the painted world.

Now Priscilla faced an issue.

The other door, the one likely leading to an exit, was designed for mortals. Though the crossbreed was much lesser than other deities or their retainers, she was still of sufficient power to tower over them. She supposed she would have to bear the discomfort.

Like squeezing into too-tight clothes, she shrank. It was not painful, more annoying than anything else. Grabbing her scythe from her bedside, it too shrank as a manifestation of her power, she stepped from the room.

The hall beyond was only dimly lit, moonlight filtering through the window at the end. She noticed the art, the other five hall doors, and the entrance beyond. Like when she was a child, Priscilla quietly and invisibly made her way through the night. She was

unwilling to risk awakening other inhabitants out of fear and politeness. She knew nothing about her Bard's companions.

The stairs beyond the hall led her to the entrance, and her wandering stopped. She passed through the glass doors without realizing it, entranced by the beauty before her. She did not notice as she returned to her regular height or the woman sitting nearby.

A full moon shone its radiance upon an island of unsurpassed beauty. With nary a cloud in the sky, Priscilla had a view unlike any she had seen. The sea gleamed like millions of jewels floated on its surface, sounds of the surf crashing in the distance. Below the hill on which the mansion was perched was a field of flowers swaying in the night air. Beyond lay an orchard, fruit she had never heard of dotting the towering trees. Beyond even that was a forest. Even in the moon's light, she could see vast swaths of green that went on for kilometres. Towering peaks dotted the distance, covered in ice and snow. Over the sound of the surf, the hybrid picked up the sound of insects, birds, and animals from the forest.

The Island was more alive than anything the crossbreed had ever seen. Her Lifehunt let her sense the sheer vitality in the land and sea.

The moon, the sea, and the Island were all dwarfed by the being that held it all in its great white claws.

They wrapped around the world as if holding a precious jewel. Five curved talons on each side held it in place. Focusing beyond them as much as possible, Priscilla realized they were pressing the Island against a scalled chest.

The hybrid felt herself grow warm, partly from the thick clothes she wore but primarily due to other reasons. Priscilla would have to reward her Bard somehow, at the same time as expressing her displeasure. He had undersold just had excellent this prison was.

"Oh god," a voice said from beside her. "There's another one."

Turning to it, Priscilla was once more struck by a vision of beauty. In her youth, the hybrid had seen Lady Gwynevere by chance. It had only been for a moment, but it had stuck with her all her life. She remembered thinking that there could be no one so beautiful. The woman before her challenged that thought.

Sitting in a luxury chair, she leaned back in leisure. Her blonde hair fell past her shoulder like a river of platinum. She wore a positively scandalous white outfit that showed off her generous curves. Her legs, thighs, midriff, and top of her bosom were exposed for all to see. One hand held a crystal glass filled with wine, and the other covered her face.

Had this woman had a soul powerful enough to sustain a larger form, there would

have been tourneys in her honour.

“Nope,” the woman said. She removed her hand from her face, and piercing blue eyes stared up at Priscilla. “I am not dealing with this.”

“Art thou Mikael’s companion?” The hybrid asked, slightly intimidated by her beauty and glare.

“His prisoner, you mean?” The blonde asked rhetorically. She stood, setting aside her drink. Though she was less than half Priscilla’s size, she made the dragon girl feel very small with her withering stare. “We all are. That madman coned you into it, so you are one of us now. You shouldn’t fall for the first pretty voice. Men will make all sorts of promises to get what they want. Mikael, especially.”

“I do not understand. My Bard did not lie.” He had mentioned she would be a prisoner until he could free her. It had been an attractive idea, like one of the fairy tales of her youth. Priscilla felt the need to defend his honour to this stranger.

“Nope, not dealing with this.” The blonde repeated, setting off into the house, gesturing for Priscilla to follow. She did, shrinking again to fit through the doors. “Mikael is more dangerous than most. He did not need to lie. He made a little promise, sang a little song, and now you are attached to him for eternity. He will free us from this Island someday, sure. But we will never be free from him nor his influence.”

“I do not understand.” The hybrid repeated as she was led through the building and down some stairs. The halls were no longer made of wood but of well-carved stone. The occasional light source provided plenty of illumination, though she did not recognize their form.

“Of course, you don’t,” the blonde leading her let out a hollow laugh. It sounded a bit mad, so Priscilla widened the distance between them, scythe gripped tightly. “Nobody does. I give all the warnings I can, and nobody listens. You will fit right in with these hero types. Gullible, the lot of you.”

“I understand thou has grievance against Mikael,” Priscilla responded as they stopped before a door. DO NOT ENTER was carved along its surface. “He has done me no wrong, and I will not allow a tarnish to his name without reason.”

“Of course you won’t,” the blonde knocked on the door. She suddenly looked tired, as if a weight had settled on her shoulders. Priscilla recognized the look of loneliness, though made no effort to comfort her. Not until she apologized for insulting her Bard. “When this is over, I hope you are sane enough to see.”

Any response Priscilla could have said to that strange utterance was halted by the door opening. Framed by the room’s light, the hybrid made out another woman of great beauty. Long purple hair fell past elfin ears, and purple eyes swept from the blonde to her.

She was at least dressed appropriately, though her blue dress did not cover her ankles.

"Emma? What is going on?" The new woman asked the blonde, Emma.

"New arrival, she's your problem now." Emma stepped away towards the stair back to the surface without another word. The pair watched her leave before looking at each other.

"Apologies, I did not mean to disturb thou this late. If it is your wish, we can meet again on the morrow?" Priscilla's long-disused lessons on courtesy had her perform a light curtsey, though her clothes were not the most appropriate.

"It's fine. I don't need sleep anyway. You can ignore Emma. She's just grumpy." The woman looked her up and down with interest. Priscilla noticed how her eyes lingered on the scales on her face, her eyebrows, her scythe, and her tail. "I see Mikael's experiment was a success. I'm Medea. Who are you?"

"I am Priscilla," she answered. She had no further title, no land to claim, and no family to call her own. She was simply Priscilla, the crossbreed.

"She's the one trapped in the painting." A new voice pipped up from behind her. "She appeared a few hours ago in one of the unused bedrooms."

The new arrival faded from the shadows behind the hybrid, her voice calm and without inflection. Priscilla fought not to attack with her scythe on instinct. It would not do to kill any of her Bard's companions.

"Thou know of me?"

"We knew Mikael was going to try to free someone trapped in a painting. Our last contact with him was before he entered." The cloaked woman explained monotonously.

"Raven," Medea nodded at the new arrival before stepping aside. "Why don't you both come into my workshop? We have much to learn." At any other point in her life, Priscilla would have balked at the woman's voice. She sounded like Seath in his more 'curious' moods. But the hybrid barely noticed, nor did she care how her pointed ears wiggled in excitement, nor how her eyes devoured Priscilla's form. Instead, the crossbreed gripped her scythe tightly, following Raven into the room as she came to a startling revelation.

Were all her Bard's 'companions' beautiful women?

Author's Note:

Oh boy this chapter. Where to begin? First of all, I couldn't justify splitting it up, there simply wasn't a reason to when i managed to write it all so quickly. I delayed it a bit to give it some editing but that was it.

Now for the floofy dragon herself.

Initially I had planed for a much more aggressive confrontation, starting with a fight before Mikael showed her 'mercy' and made the offer. Then I realized a problem. Priscilla is a tier six but is a full dragon hybrid which is a +2 to dragon aura. +1 for having second element and another +1 because she heard him sing. Effectively she counted as a tier 10 for purposes of calculation and spent weeks nearby him while he worked up a sweat. This lonely, demure, dragon girl would have no reason to, nor ability to, resist its effects.

Thus, slightly yandere Priscilla.

Even Mikael did not expect this outcome. In game, Priscilla wouldn't have followed the players around. In this world, of course she would want to know about any intruders. Since she can turn invisible, then she can follow them for a bit to determine their motives.

We also see hints of Emma and her deal. That will be elaborated on in the next few chapters, though complete answers will have to wait for a while yet.

CONFINEMENT VI

I felt an angel oh so close, though one I could not see
I felt an angel near today, sent to comfort me.

The ash was all-consuming.

It spread across the enormous cavern. Like dunes in a desert, they rose and fell like frozen waves. Even without any breeze, the little airflow swirled more ash all around. Some of it lay so heavy, and for so long, it had solidified. The lone structure in the cavern, massive and burned, towered in the distance.

Diana could see hints of the splendour of Anor Londo in its design, though it had long faded. Charred black, crumbling remains were all that was left. The ash mounds had crawled up its edge, so thick and tall that the Amazon could not tell its original size. Only a hint of warmth permeated the air, like a flickering flame trying to heat a too big room. The only illumination came from holes in the ceiling, letting the faintest radiance of the sun in.

Atop a pile of corpses, Mikael sat.

There had to be at least two dozen black knights below him, their blood pooling with the ash into a dark mud. It was a gruesome sight, with appendages separated from bodies, rent armour, and a cloying scent filling the air. He looked like an old warlord, those who carved their kingdoms and countries from the bodies of their foes. His armour bore the scars of combat, and the enchanted weapons scorch.

Had Diana been the naive girl who first left Paradise Island, she would have condemned him on this sight alone. He looked like the worst tales her family had told her about the barbarians of 'Mans World'. A fiend that needed to be stopped for justice to prevail.

After her time as Wonder Woman, the sights she had seen and the things she had been forced to do, all Diana could feel was pity. And a hint of admiration.

Pity at a man taken from his home and tossed into a cruel and dying world. A man who liked to sing and joke was forced to kill his way to freedom. Though his foes were mindless undead, which went a long way to making the image in front of her more palatable, Diana had noticed the way the journey was wearing on Mikael. He still sang and joked, but he spoke more and more about the end and freeing them. His smiles, present even when trapped in the Asylum, were rarer.

Priscilla had answered a lot of questions the women had about the world. It hadn't

painted a pretty picture. Diana feared knowing what Emma had seen in Mikael's mind more than ever.

"I'm thinking of calling it; Mount Mikael," he said as he stood from his perch. He wrenched his halberd from the spine of a knight, carefully making his way down the pile. "I'd plant a flag if I had one."

Despite herself, Diana felt a tug on her lips. She still did not like dark humour as a rule, but sometimes he said something absurd enough to make her laugh.

"And what, pray tell, would your flag look like," she played along. The way his drooping shoulders perked, his back straitened, and his eyes glimmered with amusement filled her with joy. She preferred the joking Mikael to the dreary figure atop a pile of corpses.

"Something appropriately majestic, none of that boring try-colour stuff," he rubbed his helmeted chin in mock contemplation. "A dragon is a must, of course."

"Of course," Diana agreed with equal mock severity. She followed him as they walked towards one of the exposed structures, sitting beside him as he dangled his feet over a long drop. He liked high places, she knew.

"It also must be white, so there must be a colour for the contrast." He continued as he brought out a cloth to clean his equipment of the gore that permeated it. Now that they were away from 'Mount Mikael', the smell wasn't so present. Ash still filled the air, but not enough to drown out his unique scent of surf and sun. He smelled like home. "Here's what I'm thinking. White background, purple rabbit head with its mouth open and a white dragon in its jaws."

"Why purple?" The bunny made sense, but why purple?

"For the beast of Caernobog, of course!" He exclaimed, hands going to his heart like she had stabbed him.

"That rabbit was white, and I am not sure Artoria would approve."

"I'm not talking about the movie," he explained, as if to a child. "I am talking about Fou! That fuzzy little bastard is the only good thing to ever result from Merlin. Artoria would approve one hundred percent. I am planning on beastnapping it when I drop her off. Or at least getting some floof time in before I leave."

"You know she wants to go with you," her eyes softened. Over the last few months, it had been clear Mikael did not desire their company longer than necessary. More than a few of the women opposed this. Diana felt she owed it to her friend to do all in her power to aid her in her romantic endeavour.

"I know." Though the amazon could not see his face through the helmet, the way he sighed and drooped made her heart clench in sympathy. Both for him and for Artoria.

“Is it so wrong that they have come to love you?” She asked softly. “From my understanding, many are happier now than ever.”

“It is not wrong,” he said, sagging some more. “I’m not one of those ‘boohoo, beautiful women love me, woe is me’ edge lords. In any other situation, I would be thrilled. The lures are not mind-control. I wouldn’t have purchased them if I did not plan on using them in the future. All they can do, like dragon aura, is encourage romance, not create it from nothing. It is simply a more extreme version of dressing well, being friendly and attractive. You all were supposed to be immune, but they can still ignore it with enough willpower. Like you.”

“Then why,” Diana ignored the pit in her stomach that his last words caused. They were not appropriate.

“This is a case of ‘it’s not you, it’s me.’” Mikeal chuckled hollowly, the sound void of his usual good humour. “For reasons I can’t adequately explain, I cannot return their affection. It would be better to let them move on with their lives rather than string them along like some dumb harem protagonist. It will suck, but we will be better for it in the long run.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?” The words came out harsher than she meant, but Diana couldn’t accept his response. It would be too sad for everyone involved.

“Can’t.” He looked her in the eyes as if trying to make her understand. “I quite literally cannot put it into words. Raven knows a bit if you want to ask.”

“And Emma?”

“Emma is,” he struggled to find the words. “She read my mind too deeply at the wrong time. It’s no secret I had to use a command seal for both our sakes.”

“What did you order her to do?”

“It was a while ago, but I believe my exact words were; ‘Never delve deeply into my mind’, ‘Never tell anyone what you find there’ and one more order. I used all six of my seals to make sure they stuck.” He looked so sad, as if remembering his actions were physically painful. “I’m not proud of it. I initially purchased the seals because they were cheap and extremely useful. I was half surprised it worked since I cannot interact with you all.”

“She’s been telling everyone that you’ve been delaying things. Putting off facing this ‘Gwyn’.”

“She’s not wrong, technically,” he explained. “If I just focused on getting here, I could have arrived at the kiln a week or two ago.”

“Then why didn’t you?” She knew it wasn’t out of malicious intent. If so, Mikael wouldn’t have reached this far at all.

“A few reasons. As much as I want to be free, there are still good people in this world. I tried to help them as best as I could. I can’t solve all their problems, this world is still ending, but I can make their lives a bit easier than I could when this was a game.”

“Admirable,” Diana wasn’t flattering him. His willingness to help, and his determination to keep pressing on by himself, they were all traits that she admired. Though he claimed to be no hero, sometimes a little kindness could make all the difference. “Will they be joining us on the Island?”

“No,” he shook his head emphatically. “While a few could qualify, I become responsible for anyone bound to me. I only tested it out with Priscilla because I wanted to know if capturing was possible, what the effects would be, and if she could be used as a loophole. I had hoped that because she was initially part of this world, I would be able to use her as an intermediary between the Island and me.”

“But she never gets summoned,” Diana finished his thoughts for him. “She stays on the Island. Mostly in her room. In fact, I believe she is most taken with video games.” He snorted in wry amusement at the thought. “Is that the only reason you have delayed this confrontation?”

“I am also scared,” he admitted. “Scared of what comes next. I hope I just need to beat Gwyn. That it will be enough, and we can all go free. I know this world because of a game, Dark Souls. It was a trilogy. I fear beating Gwyn, the first game’s final boss, will not be enough. That I will have to complete the other two to free us. I am also afraid that when I beat him, I…” He stopped suddenly. Diana listened as he poured his heart out. He usually kept his cards close to the chest. This was a rare moment of vulnerability. She wished she could comfort him, hug him. When he did not continue, she spoke.

“If that happens, none of us would blame you. A few more months on the Island wouldn’t be so bad.” She tried to soothe his worries. “An extended vacation. We will continue to help any way we can.”

“Thanks, but it would still suck.”

“Then let us take it one step at a time.” She shifted tracks. “Nothing is certain until you defeat this Gwyn. Tell me about him.” Mikael took a deep breath, regaining his focus.

“Gwyn is or was, I suppose, the chief deity of this world. He ruled for millennia during the Age of Fire after defeating the Stone Dragons of the previous era. It was a prosperous time as civilization flourished. He wasn’t perfect, but I can tell he wasn’t a complete tyrant initially. Amoral, but not malicious. But then the fire started to fade, and things deteriorated. He tried everything to preserve it. Some weren’t so bad but had negative consequences, like trying to create a second flame. Others were repugnant. He sacrificed untold millions to keep it burning. Eventually, Gwyn threw himself on the pyre

and committed the first true sin of this world. The natural order of this world was to transition from one age to the next. From the featureless Age of Ancients came the Age of Fire, the age of the gods. Following was to be the Age of Dark, the age of man."

"Like how Oranous and Gaia birthed the Titans who supplanted them, only to be overthrown by the Olympians and humans in turn."

"Pretty much, though Gwyn would not allow it. He bound the Dark, never to let the fire truly fade. This corrupts the world, locking it in a perpetual cycle of fire growing strong, only to wane again. Every time getting worse until time and space deteriorate and collapse. All lands will converge at the end, and the remaining survivors flee to another world."

"Defeating him will stop the deterioration?"

"Nope," he answered cheerfully, popping the 'P'. "By the time I appeared in the Asylum, it was already too late. The sin already committed. We are simply on the first cycle, Gwyn has doomed the world, and I cannot even blame him. I would have done the same." At her disbelieving look, his smile softened to a sad one. "Gwyn is not a villain, just another victim. In a way, he is even a hero. He saw his world ending, his family fracturing, his subjects being cursed. He tried everything in his power to stop it. He succeeded, preserving his age for thousands of years. His children live on, as do many of his subjects. Did he take the wrong steps? Of course. At the core of it all, I think he did the best he could."

"You make him sound admirable. You should tell us more when we are free, especially about how you defeated him. I imagine it will be a battle for the ages." Mikeal shook his head, still smiling sadly.

"That is one of the saddest parts. A tiny tragedy atop a mountain of them. The man in that Kiln is no longer the god he was. Gwyn isn't the army leader that took up arms against the Everlasting Dragons anymore. He isn't a god of sunlight and lightning. He is no longer a valiant warrior who stood tens of feet tall. Gwyn is a husk, barely larger than me. He is hollow, mindless. When he fights, it is without the skill of a veteran but the instincts of a dying animal. I expect I faced a more significant challenge facing his executioner than I will find with him."

"That just means you will emerge victorious all the easier." Diana almost patted him on the back, only stopping herself when her hand was halfway through his armour. "It sounds like mercy to slay him now."

"It will be," Mikael said as he stood. He eyed the Kiln in the distance before turning to her. "Do you mind opening the portal for me?"

"Of course," the amazon stood as well, willing the door to open. It came as quickly as

ever, a shimmering rectangle of pulsing grey energy. Mikael unlatched a box tied to his belt and threw it through the portal. It disappeared with nary a ripple.

“One way or the other, I won’t need it anymore on this side. Medea can sort through it. I imagine some of you girls will find my collection interesting.” He explained, seeming to find his resolve. He turned, starting to make his way to the Kiln.

“We’ll be waiting for you.” She called after him, but he only waved.

Perhaps it was fear of Mikael dying. Maybe it was her desire to motivate him. Perhaps it was annoyance at having her words waived off. Perchance it was the image of a good man, walking in a field of ash all alone to face a god. Maybe it sprang from those emotions bubbling in her chest that she kept to herself to support her friend. Either way, something pushed her to shout her following words as she stepped through the portal back to the Island.

“Don’t you dare leave us!”

Diana did not see Mikael stumble at her words. She was long gone when he turned in surprise to stare in her direction. Diana was not there to hear him whisper to himself as if a mantra to remember as he continued towards the Kiln of the First Flame.

“Don’t you dare go hollow.”

******

As Diana reappeared in the mansion, she continued towards one of the sitting rooms. The villa was large enough to hold three, one large enough for the dozen women to fit in comfortably and then two smaller ones. It was to one of these latter ones that she headed. She had been summoned while grabbing some food. On the way, Wonder Woman noticed Robin and Glynda playing cards.

“Go fish,” the archeologist called. A card was telekinetically carried from the mixed pile into the teacher’s hand. It looked like Robin was about to win.

Nearby, already eliminated from the game, Yoruichi and Tsunade were seated on a loveseat. They each held a saucer of Sake. Judging by the flush on their faces had been drinking for a while.

Diana allowed herself to smile. The blonde Hokage reminded her of Shiera, severe but with a temper. She was a warrior who had experienced many losses, she was sure. On the other hand, Yoruichi reminded the amazon of a female, tan, Barry. Playful, flirty, but willing to get serious when it mattered.

Even if they were set free and went their own ways soon, Diana was glad to have met each of these women. They were all admirable, in one form or another. Heroes in their

own right. Some quite literally.

Wonder Woman arrived at her destination, the small living room that lacked the bay's view but came with an entire home theatre system.

"How did it go?" Artoria asked as she entered. The blonde was lounging in one of the recliners, a massive tub of popcorn in her hands. The group had learned early on that any time there were snacks or food, King Arthur got her own portions. Trying to take food from her was like trying to steal gold from a dragon.

The exception being mashed potatoes. The one time Medea tried to make food from Artoria's home country.

"As good as can be expected," Diana took her own seat facing the massive television. "I do not think he will lose, but he grows ever more weary with each passing day. I hope his fears are unfounded, and it will be enough to defeat Gwyn."

"It is a shame, though," Medea spoke up. She lay sprawled out on a couch of her own. "We just started this one. I was hoping to finish before we left."

Everybody had tried various hobbies in an effort to keep occupied while on the Island. In the weeks since her arrival, Priscilla had taken to playing video games, for example. Reading, training, hunting, and spending time at the beach were some of the most common. Only Glynda really watched television. She enjoyed her 'soaps'. Then, while perusing the library of shows and movies, Diana came across 'The sword in the stone.' A charming animated tale of King Arthur.

The afternoon that followed was one she remembered fondly. Artoria had been adorably bamboozled by the film, pointing out numerous inconsistencies and problems. That set a tone where Diana would try to find more renditions of her friend's misadventures, and the blonde would viciously tear them apart. Medea had joined them in this exercise at the first opportunity.

Watching the Monty Python version had been the funniest so far. Diana could not remember the last time she cried from laughter.

Their most recent discovery, a show called 'Merlin', had Artoria chomping at the bit. Apparently, the famous wizard was quite the character in her world. While the show took a more realistic edge, for all its magic, it had been one of the most inaccurate so far. Even Diana knew that Merlin and Arthur should be of different ages.

"Indeed," Artoria responded, devouring more popcorn. "I hope we can continue into the future. I wish to see where this tiny 'Mordred' story leads. He is much different than my own traitorous son."

"Speaking of," Diana interjected politely as the next episode began. "If it is not too personal, how did that work in your world. Was Morgana a man?"

“No, she was female. A crafty witch and dangerous foe.”

“Then how?” Medea asked in turn, leaving off the end of the question.

“Merlin.” Artoria looked as if someone had spit in her food. She spoke the name as if a curse as if it alone was enough to answer the question. In a way, it was. The Incubus was as infamous as he was famous.

“Well,” Medea shifted topics, sensing her friend’s unwillingness to elaborate. “We will have to force Mikael to let us stay. I’m sure we can come up with something.” Artoria’s mood improved rapidly at the idea.

The next few hours were spent happily, Diana’s mind off the subject of a lone man in a dying world. As she went to bed, she resolved to ask Tsunade about Mikael when she returned from her summoning in the morning.

Only, Tsunade wasn’t summoned at 9am as expected. Nobody was.

3pm as well passed without anyone disappearing, as did 9pm. By that point, everyone had noticed the discrepancy. Even Priscilla, who spent most of her time in her room playing games and was never summoned, noticed the change in atmosphere.

The first day passed in confusion, but without too much worry.

The second and third days without summoning saw tensions rise.

By the fourth and fifth, many women were at wit’s end. Artoria passed her days in stone-faced silence. Medea no longer cooked meals, spending all her time in her workshop, sorting through the bottomless box Mikael had provided. Yoruichi started to spar with Scathach at every waking moment, a decision the Celt agreed to. All the others maintained distance, trying to occupy themselves.

Two women were the most surprising.

Priscilla remained wholly unconcerned. She still spent her days playing video games, reading books, and practicing her singing.

Emma was frantic.

She paced everywhere, muttering to herself. Her usually perfectly prepared appearance was deteriorating by the day. Bags formed under her eyes. She wore fewer designer clothes and more baggy sweats. She drank herself to sleep every night. Sometimes the mutant would walk up to another of the women and start to say something, only to cut off her words and storm away.

By the end of the sixth day, Diana had enough.

Without warning, Wonder Woman marched up to the White Queen, grabbed her arm and started pulling her towards the large sitting room.

“Call the others,” she ordered.

“Huh,” was the intelligent reply from the blonde. She looked a mess, but Diana would

talk to her about that later. They had more important matters.

"The others," the amazon repeated. "Call them to the meeting room." From Diana's knowledge, Emma had been a very powerful psychic before her summoning. Like the rest of the women, her abilities had been enhanced by their arrival on the Island. The mutant could reach out anywhere on the Island without aid, easily able to call the other women from wherever they were.

The mutant stared at her severely before sagging and nodding her head reluctantly. While not happy, she had seen the plan in Diana's mind and was going along.

Like the rest of the building, the main living room was well appointed. It was the largest room in the house, with a crystal chandelier hanging from the wooden ceiling and artistic tapestries hanging from the wall. Unlike the other gathering rooms, this one lacked the extra features such as the television and stocked bar. It was only furnished with loveseats, chairs, recliners, side tables, and a soft burgundy rug covering most of the floor. There was enough seating for two dozen people, more if they didn't mind being intimate.

From the control panel on the wall, Diana banished half the seats to the wall. Then she gathered eleven into a circle in the center of the room. Taking a chair, the amazon made sure to keep an eye on Emma. The platinum blonde sat in a recliner beside her, surly and quiet. She must have already called the others as they trickled in. All eleven women trapped on the Island had gathered in only a few minutes.

"I thank you all for coming," the heroine began. She eyed everyone in turn, making sure she had their attention. Some looked curious, like Priscilla, but most looked serious like Artoria. "We should have done this the first day, but I think it is time we pooled our resources and knowledge. We are trapped here. Mikael has been beyond our reach for almost a week. We need to do something."

"What can we do?" Yoruichi asked helplessly. The shinigami was sprawled out in an undignified heap horizontally on one of the recliners, her head and feet dangling over the edge. "I've been trying to bust the bubble around us for the last few days. Still no luck."

"I have attempted to willfully manifest a portal to Mikael with no success," Raven spoke up. She said her words monotone, but Diana was familiar enough with the cambion to sense her frustration. The former Teen Titan was also staring at Emma more intensely than usual. The blonde mutant paid her no mind, eyes closed and brow furrowed.

"I know nothing we have attempted has succeeded," Wonder Woman spoke, sensing the mood deteriorating. "This is to pool our knowledge more than anything. What do we know?"

"The dragon is still alive," Robin spoke. Though she looked calm, Diana knew she was on her sixth cup of coffee. It was still before noon. "I have been checking up on it

regularly. It shows no sign of waking, no matter what I do, but it still breathes. If we accept that it is another body of Mikael's, he is still alive."

"Our Bard would not fail," Priscilla chimed in. She was barely paying attention, eyes locked on a handheld gaming console. Diana felt a spike of frustration at the hybrid's nonchalance but smothered it. Arguments would get them nowhere.

"I, too, trust that Sir Mikael will succeed." Artoria agreed before continuing. "Could this simply be an intermission? It was always possible he would need to defeat three challenges instead of one. Could this be a period between?"

"It is possible," Medea hedged, looking unsure. "Mikael has told me that each game is set thousands of years apart. Time is unstable there. If so, I have no idea how long this will last."

"Why don't we cut the bullshit? Ice Queen!" Tsunade harshly interrupted. The former Hokage had remained staring at Emma the entire time. Diana, too, had kept half an on the mutant. Many times she made to speak, but no sound left her throat. "What is going on?"

Author's Note:

You thought it was answers but it was I! Cliffhanger!
For those interested in the complete poem I've been using at the start of chapters here it is:

I felt an angel near today, though one I could not see
I felt an angel oh so close, sent to comfort me
I felt an angel's kiss, soft upon my cheek
And oh, without a single word of caring did it speak
I felt an angel's loving touch, soft upon my heart
And with that touch, I felt the pain and hurt within depart
I felt an angel's tepid tears, fall softly next to mine
And knew that as those tears did dry a new day would be mine
I felt an angel's silken wings enfold me with pure love
And felt a strength within me grow, a strength sent from above
I felt an angel oh so close, though one I could not see
I felt an angel near today, sent to comfort me.

In all seriousness, I was in a major debate on where to end this one. I generally dislike abrupt endings like this, especially for the last half chapter of part 1. I really wanted to have this part from a different perspective and, in order to maintain consistency, it would mean ending the chapter there.

I made a judgement call.

Isolation

ISOLATION I

I sit beside the fire and think
of all that I have seen,
of meadow flowers and butterflies
in summers that have been;

Tsunade was tired.

Her time on the Island had been excellent. The facilities were better than any resort. The food was exquisite. The Island was picturesque. The blonde especially enjoyed the company. She had made fast friends with a few and remained on good terms with all the other women. There was something nice about not being treated as the Fifth Hokage, the greatest kunoichi to ever live. Most of the women here had kicked her ass when they sparred, which spurned her onto training like never before.

It helped that the library had medical knowledge centuries ahead of her time. In the three months since she had been summoned, she had learned as much about the medicine as in her fifty years before. Another benefit was the youth.

Not Youth, that for Gai and his mini-me.

Though Tsunade's unique Henge gave her the appearance of a woman in her late twenties, she had been considerably older. Combined with the after-effects of her seal and she had felt every second of her 55 years. Now she was young again, in her prime and with more chakra than she knew what to do with.

Altogether, she felt better physically and mentally than ever before.

But she was so god damn tired.

Tired of men going off to die and leaving her behind.

Tired of feeling hope, only to have it ripped from her.

Tired of helplessness.

The Sannin liked Mikael. She really did. She didn't spend as much time with him as others, but it was always enjoyable when they did talk. He asked her about her world. About Konoha and the Land of Fire. About her history and feelings. About politics and being a med-nin. His family had been nurses, he explained.

He couldn't stand being in medicine because he did not care enough about others to want to help. Tsunade had laughed at that, responding that many joined the field for the same reason. The power over Life and death attracted many of the more sociopathic. She laughed again when he mentioned he considered it but decided not to because he couldn't be bothered to memorize all the body parts.

She asked about his world as well. What did he do for a living? What were his hobbies? What were his dreams? They weren't profound conversations, but they had been enjoyable. Tsunade did not love him, not like Artoria, Priscilla, and Medea clearly did. She did not have a crush on him like Glynda or Raven. She wasn't desperate to sleep with him like Yoruichi and Scathach. (In her mind's privacy, Tsunade admitted she was interested in seeing what all the fuss 'Sticky Fingers' was about.)

More than anything, Tsunade's relationship with Mikael was best defined as companions. Like two ninjas on a long-term mission, they couldn't help but grow more fond of each other as they interacted.

That is why she wasn't surprised to be disappointed over this last week. Of course, another man in her life left her behind. It seemed like she was destined to outlive everyone she cared about.

Like Dan, Nawaki, and Sensei.

Like Jiraiya.

So she lashed out when she saw Emma withholding information. Tsunade knew she was bound by one of those Command Seal things. But, like the seals in her world, there were ways around them if you knew what you were doing. You couldn't talk? Write down your message? Couldn't communicate? Communicate with silence. A non-answer could be just as good as a yes or no depending on the question. That Emma, supposedly a more advanced Yamanaka, was keeping secrets pissed her off.

The kunoichi needed to do something. Anything. And bad intel got people killed.

"While a bit harsher than I would put it," Glynda pipped up after Tsunade's question. "I, too, wish to know what you have kept from us, Emma."

"I'm trying!" The White Queen almost snarled in response. She made to say something else but, once more, no sound left her mouth.

"She is feeling frustration, anger, and despair," Raven mentioned calmly. The mutant looked at her in an almost comical look of betrayal. "Now she is embarrassed."

"I can still use Rule Breaker on you," Medea said. Most of the group turned to look at the witch. "My Noble Phantasm should still be effective at removing the effects of a Command Seal. When she first asked about seals, I offered to use it. She turned me down, though she did not say why."

"And why didn't you let her use it?" Tsunade practically growled her words, angry that the solution had always been there, but the mutant refused to use it. Emma Frost stared back at the Hokage defiantly.

"Shame and fear," Raven answered for her. Again, the mutant shot the cambion a betrayed look.

“I think that is enough,” Diana spoke up. “We are not here to persecute anyone. We are here to try and work together.”

“I do not see what the issue is,” Priscilla finally chimed in after putting away her game. She looked around the room like a child seeking answers from adults. Despite being the oldest in the room, she was also the most naive and inexperienced, Tsunade reminded herself. “Our Bard will succeed. We need only wait.”

“He has improved,” Scathach answered the dragon girl as if giving a lecture. “But he can still lose. We are afraid he bit off more than he could chew and died to an opponent he couldn’t win against.”

“I still do not understand,” the hybrid tilted her head in confusion. “I hath mentioned he is undead, have I not?”

“The undead can still die,” Yoruichi explained. Tsunade felt a pit form in her stomach. She was starting to guess where the crossbreed’s confidence came from. She prayed she was wrong. “We’ve all seen him kill plenty.”

“Priscilla,” Robin asked softly. “When you say undead, you do not mean someone who has come back to life, do you? Or somebody who is neither living nor dead?”

“Both? Neither? He is undead. He is branded by the Dark Sign.” The way the dragon girl tilted her head in confusion would have been cute had Tsunade not been so frustrated.

“What does that mean?” She snapped. “He can still die, can’t he?”

“Of course, he can,” the crossbreed replied defensively. Tsunade felt a tiny bit of hope that she had guessed wrong. But that hope was extinguished with her following words. “He died sixteen times while I followed him. But every time, he returned rather quickly.”

“What?” Tsunade did not know who whispered the words as all the gathered women looked at Priscilla in horror. It could have been her. Emma looked resigned. She probably knew already.

“Indeed,” the hybrid continued. She looked proud, like she was reporting an achievement. “Only sixteen times. Those who came before died thrice that amount and became hollow for it well before the halfway point. Our Bard is most skilled. Though the wheel skeletons in the well are often the breaking point, with their spikes and grinding, Sir Mikael only died to them once. The rotting dragon provided more of a challenge, its miasma melting his flesh, but after only two deaths, he felled it using his pyromancy.”

The dragon girl continued, bragging about how formidable ‘Sir Mikael’ was even as the assembled women looked worse and worse.

It was like Edo Tensei, only so much worse. Tsunade knew Mikael still felt pain.

“Stop!” Diana shouted, halting Priscilla’s retelling about their summoner’s battle with a group of ‘Phalanx Demons’. The Amazon had her eyes closed and was taking deep

breaths. “Thank you, Priscilla. That answered one of our questions. I have another, if you do not mind?”

“Certainly,” the crossbreed looked so happy to help, Tsunade wondered if she did not notice the reactions of those in the room. Medea looked catatonic. Scathach and Raven were stonefaced and silent. Yoruichi had fallen from her chair and stared at the dragon girl from the floor. Robin looked pained, and Glynda silently wept. Artoria had summoned her spear and looked thunderous like she wanted to fight.

Stinging pain in her hand drew Tsunade’s attention.

Looking down, she saw blood. Distantly she realized she must have crushed the sake jar in her hands.

“Thank you,” the Amazon opened her eyes and looked at the hybrid in determination. “How long was Mikael in the Painted World of Ariamis?”

“I could not tell you the exact length, nobody slept, and there was no sun, so days did not matter. Time tended to blend together. I can only approximate that I spent more time following him than I have on this Island.”

The pit fell from Tsunade’s stomach. Priscilla had been here for three weeks. Mikael had spent more than three weeks non-stop in the painted world. None of the women had been summoned at that time. The interval between summonings, six hours on this end, was more than a month on his end. Assuming the time between summoning was consistent, with three a day, some quick math gave Tsunade a rough number.

Twenty-two years.

Mikael had been in that world for twenty-two years. Likely more. He had been practically alone, fighting and dying to all manner of monstrosities for over two decades in a world on its last gasp.

Tsunade needed another drink.

Judging by the faces of the other women, they had come to a similar realization.

Artoria stood suddenly, her quick movement startling some of the others.

Without a word, she marched from the room, practically stomping her way out. Tsunade did not need to be a sensor to feel what came next. Her power, raging and turbulent, flowed from her as she left the building. It coalesced into a point.

Tsunade could hear the shout of anger and pain from within the building. She could see the golden light shoot towards the sky through the window. Her Noble Phantasm, unleased to its fullest extent at the sky, shook the building in its proximity.

Again and again, Artoria unleashed her spear at the jewelled bubble encasing them.

Half a dozen times, she shouted to the sky, receiving no response. The assembled women did not continue without her, letting her vent. After fifteen minutes, Artoria

returned. She marched in, looking no worse for wear. Her back was straight, and her eyes steady. Perhaps for the first time since they had met, Tsunade saw the most famous King in all her glory.

"Speak," the Lion King ordered the White Queen. "You knew of this." It was not a question. Emma did not respond. She continued to look resigned.

"Regret, sadness, frustration." Raven narrated, her eyes hard. For some reason, Tsunade would swear she could see a second set of eyes above her normal ones. Blazing red in intensity.

"I cannot," Emma finally responded, her voice frustrated.

"Let us take a different tactic," Diana proposed. "In my most recent summoning, Mikael told me he used all six command seals to give you three orders. 'Never delve deeply into my mind', 'Never tell anyone what you find there' and one more order. Those were his exact words. You should be able to tell us what that third order was since it was not found in his mind."

The mutant looked at the Amazon and blushed. Actually blushed. Tsunade did not need to hear Raven know it was not the flush of attraction and lust.

"Extreme shame and embarrassment."

For a long moment, Emma sat there. She did not meet anyone's eyes, though they all watched her intently. Finally, she spoke, in a whispered voice, as if she was afraid of being heard.

"He used one seal on each of those orders. The other was a single command, reinforced four times." The other women of the group leaned forward to hear her words as she paused. "He ordered: 'Regain your sanity.'"

"Excuse me?" Glynda asked, wiping the tracks of tears from her face. She looked determined and resolute. "What does that mean? Why would you lose your sanity?" Emma remained silent.

"Going forward, I will assume any time you do not answer will be because you can not," Diana spoke. "The fact that you did not answer means you lost your sanity from something in his mind. I was made to understand you are an accomplished psychic?"

"In my world, I can count on one hand the number of beings who could rival me and have fingers left over." The White Queen took evident pride in her abilities, which furthered the question.

"You saw something in his mind that drove you to madness?" Scathach asked. The silence was her reply.

"You have worked with the insane before, correct?" Glynda felt the need to clarify.

"I have. The exact nature of 'madness' varies. It could simply be sociopathy,

psychopathy, dissociative personalities, or schizophrenia. The common understanding of the mind is woefully pathetic, which causes most to label any sort of odd behaviour as 'madness'. I have worked with many cases and only very rarely have I seen insanity in its literal definition." Tsunade realized once more that Emma, for all her faults, was an intelligent woman who had been a teacher. She knew her subject well.

"The wording of the order is suspicious." Medea did not look like the happy housewife she had been these last few months. She looked like the witch who had been first summoned, her eye set in a severe contemplation. "'Never delve deeply.' This implies you can still read his mind, but the issue is deeper, more fundamental. It cannot be natural to his homeworld. That world lacked magic or any power that should be able to influence you."

"Another side effect of the 'Catalogue'?" Artoria asked the mutant. Silence.

"One of the defences, perhaps?" Glynda proposed.

"None of the defences are active," Emma explained. "The talents and lures are."

"Then it has to be the dragon aspect." Artoria deduced. Silence. "Very well, what do we know about the dragon options in the catalogue?"

"The more points he spent on his dragon abilities, the higher his Tier," Medea explained. Tsunade knew she had spent considerable time with the man, talking about the nature of his abilities. "Baring his purchase of us, the greatest investment was on that."

"Indeed," Artoria nodded as she continued where her friend left. "We spent much time talking about dragons and their nature. It seems in the catalogue they were categorized by element. Fire, air, ice and the like. Mikael mentioned he was aware of other 'elements'. and more abstract concepts, such as power, multiplication, division, star, creation, and others. To meet the requirements of reaching the 10th Tier, he needed to purchase two such elements."

"Were his elements the issue?" Tsunade asked Emma directly. Once more, the silence spoke for itself. "One of them? Or both?" Emma still did not speak, though this time, the Hokage didn't know whether that was affirmative or not. "He did not have the madness element or some such, did he? Or perhaps, unknowable?"

"No." That answer looked like it was a struggle to say. They were teetering on the edge of the Command. The others tried their own hand.

"Power?" "No."

"Time?" "No."

"Infinity?" "No."

"Void?" "No."

"Darkness?" "No."

“Death?” “No.”

“We could attempt this for hours and still not find an answer,” Diana finally interrupted the guessing game. “Now we know the root of the issue, we can take steps to address it. Medea, your Noble Phantasm would remove the power of the seals, correct? Is there any way to only remove one or two and leave the other intact?”

“No,” the witch shook her head. Tsunade could almost see her mind racing, and, for a moment, the image of Orochimaru was superimposed on her. “Rule Breaker is absolute. If I try to sever one binding, it will sever them all. But we can prepare steps to make sure whatever caused the madness first doesn’t affect you anymore.”

“How so?” The kunoichi hoped it wasn’t anything too wrong. As a ninja, she often didn’t have the luxury of being moral, but Tsunade tried to do her best when given a chance.

“I’ve actually already started,” Medea looked a bit sheepish. “Every time I cook, I put various materials in the food that bolsters us. When we arrived on the Island I’m sure you all noticed you were considerably stronger?” There were nods around the room, so the witch continued. “It was a benefit of the summoning. We all went up one Tier.”

“That made us stronger, but how?” Glynda asked.

“While Mikael was vague on the exact details, he explained it as a qualitative difference. 1 through 3 are considered baseline humans. They might be skilled or intelligent but still limited to human abilities. 4-5 usually have one or two supernatural powers, the main difference being their strength, usefulness and possible downsides. Glynda and Robin, for example, are extremely dangerous but are limited to their devil fruit or semblance for the most part.

Six to ten are where things get finicky. I qualified as a six, but given enough time, materials, and magic, I could theoretically do most of what any of you could. Because of those limits, I am lower on the Tier. The easiest method to differentiate tiers is based on their possible effects. 6 is a strong ability but limited to a personal level. Anti-Personnel. 7 would be anti-fortress, 8 anti-continent, 9 anti-world, 10 will continue upwards to infinity from there so there would be a wide range.”

“While the subject is interesting,” Diana interrupted the impromptu lecture. “I believe we were asking how it would help Emma.”

“Right,” the witch looked embarrassed about her sudden tangents, but Tsunade didn’t fault her for it. If the subject had been medicine (or booze), she could get just as distracted. “To make a complicated subject simple, every Tier is a qualitative change that not only makes us stronger but removes weakness. Robin can now swim, for example. As I said, I have been using materials in our food that will boost our Tiers the more we

consume them. The lower the Tier, the less you need. I haven't been putting too much into the meals, only about 120ml per person, but I could up the dosage. If I compress about a litre per person, it shouldn't affect the taste too much. Maybe pills?" Medea devolved into a mumbling fit, but Tsunade had an important question.

"Any side effect?"

"Yes, but that is what we want if I want to be able to use Rule Breaker," Medea responded, barely paying attention to the med-nin.

"Excuse me?!" Emma interrupted.

"Raising your Tier is not feasible. Even if you took all three doses of 1 litre a day, we would need to continue for eight and a half years to get you to tier 9. Since the material comes from a dragon, as we ingest it, we will eventually cross a threshold and start manifesting draconic traits ourselves. To reach that point is much quicker. Only five months or so."

"You will become dragons?" Priscilla chimed in, eyes shining.

"To a degree, though which form that takes will vary to my knowledge. It might be as simple as our bodies producing a Dragon Core like Artoria or turning us full draconic. Either way, the process will be fully reversible once it happens."

"I am not sure how comfortable I am with changing my body to that degree." The White Queen frowned at the greek witch.

"Then you will be bound by those commands for the rest of your life," Medea shrugged uncaringly. "If the problem is Mikael's draconic element driving you mad, then the only solutions are either removing your memories entirely or assuming an element for yourself."

"Fine," the mutant spoke as she stood up. "Then I assume we are done here. You all got your answers, and we are still no closer to getting aid to Mikael. What a waste of time."

"One last thing," Tsunade stood as well but regarded everyone else in the room for a moment. "If we are to be ingesting these substances, then I will be providing checkups on everyone weekly." Medea made to speak, but she was silenced by a look. "I am sure you will do your best, but this is non-negotiable. I have seen too many people get 'power-ups' only for it to destroy them. At the first sign of anything going wrong, we stop it. Are we clear?" The rest of the room made various sounds of agreement, though Medea looked a bit mulish. Too bad for her, Tsunade would not have a 'Hero Water' situation on her hands if she could help it.

"What about Mikael?" Tsunade heard Artoria ask Diana as the pair left the room.

"We wait," the amazon sighed. "Not much else we can do for the moment. At least we

know he has not perished. We must trust him to come back to us eventually." Artoria did not look pleased by those words, but nobody else was either.

Tsunade was tired of waiting.

Thankfully, she only had to wait two more days. At 9am sharp, the Hokage vanished from the mansion while providing a checkup on Raven.

******

As soon as Tsunade felt the summons, weight was removed from her chest.

Mikael had made it.

Looking around, she found herself on a stone gazebo in a wide field of tall grass. Great cliff faces towered above her on each side, and moonlight streamed from between the crag above.

Mikael lay curled up on the stone platform at her feet. He had returned to his 'jerky' form, as he called it. His skin was dried, pockmarked, and sunken in. She could count his bones, and his eyes were desiccated to the point she was shocked they could be used at all.

His form trembled as he cried. He whispered to himself, over and over again. The words were slurred and almost unintelligible but were repeated enough that the Sannin could piece them together.

"I didn't go hollow."

Great sobs racked him as he rocked back and forth. He hadn't noticed her, weeping as he was. Gone was the playful, somewhat stoic man and a wreck was all that had been left behind.

Silently, Tsunade crouched behind him. While he trembled, she cast a simple diagnostic Jutsu. Like the others, she couldn't affect the physical world, but her senses and abilities were not hindered. She couldn't heal him, but getting a scan was possible. She did so at every summoning as a security measure.

More than any of the others, she knew the strength he had accumulated over his journey. It had seemed like an absurd rate of growth, going from a civilian level of musculature to being able to rival her strength with physical power alone. Now that she knew it was over the process of decades, rather than the three months previously believed, his growth had made better sense.

All that growth was gone now.

He had returned to the level he had been in that cell. Decades of effort, pain and suffering had been wiped away. Tsunade had seen ninja give up over less. Even she felt frustrated.

But the former Hokage took a deep breath and sat beside the crying man. She wished there was something she could do. The med-nin found that even holding someone's hand could help. But, as usual, she passed through him.

So Tsunade sat by the man's side while he wept his heart out.

She sat there as the minutes dragged on, his open sobbing slowing to quiet whimpers. It was at least half an hour before he spoke.

"I didn't go hollow." He said the words as both an achievement and a curse. His voice was rough and gravelly, like someone who hadn't had water in far too long.

"You didn't," now that Tsunade truly understood what that meant, she couldn't help the pride that crept into her voice.

"I wanted to," he admitted. "I never wanted something so much in my life. I wanted all the thoughts, memories, and pain to disappear."

"But you didn't."

"I couldn't," Mikael sounded guilty as if admitting a great sin. "I tried letting go. Tried to give in. But like everything else, I didn't get a fucking choice." He practically snarled the last words.

"I am sorry." That was all she could say. Sorry that they were in this situation. Sorry that he was forced to go through this alone. Sorry that the world wasn't fair. Sorry that all his effort had gone unrewarded.

"It's fine," he mumbled as he sat up finally, wiping the tear stains from his eyes. "I don't blame any of you. You all are as much victims in this as I am." Tsunade didn't really agree with that but held her tongue. "Besides, there is good news. Our Freedom is guaranteed now."

"How so?"

"If I can't go hollow, it is just a matter of time until I beat the third game. It will take a while, maybe even a year on your end, but it will happen." While she was happy he could be optimistic about the situation, Tsunade was still not pleased with him.

"How long were you going to keep hiding the time difference?" Her eyes narrowed at him, daring him to lie once more. He blinked at her in surprise before shrugging his shoulders.

"As long as I could since it did not seem to matter."

"Did not matter!" Tsunade snarled, her fists clenching in frustration. She wished she could hit him. "You've been doing this for decades! How does that not matter?" He appeared unconcerned with her anger.

"For the same reason I can't go hollow. It ensures I will never settle down, constantly pushing me forward. My memories never fade, always the same as when I first appeared in

that cell. It was initially why I chose that ending in the first place. Whether it takes me centuries or millennia, I will keep moving forward to be free." Tsunade narrowed her eyes at him.

"That is one of your elements, isn't it? Freedom? You are insane because you are a conceptual Dragon of Freedom which is trapped. Emma went into your mind, and it also drove her mad." Perhaps for the first time, Mikael looked disturbed.

"Did Medea use Rule Breaker? Is Emma okay?"

"We weasled some information out of her without breaking the commands. She is fine." Tsunade could appreciate he was worried for the mutant, but she wouldn't allow him to change the subject. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"You are, but only partially." He sagged, looking resigned. "To reach tier 10, I had to take two elements. I chose Freedom and Life. Now I am trapped and undead. The irony is astounding. I chose Freedom since I figured it would help with dimensional travel and Life, so I would be harder to kill. I didn't think it would be too much of a problem when I first wrote that story since you all would be enough to curb stomp Dark Souls."

"If every plan worked out, the world would be a better place." Tsunade tried to hold on to the anger. To feel hurt at his secret-keeping. To feel betrayed. Looking at him, so hunched and tired, made it impossible. In the end, she just sighed. That they knew now really did change nothing. "You said something back there while crying. You kept repeating, 'I didn't go hollow.' Why?"

It was difficult to make out a proper expression with his sunken eyes and emaciated face, but for the first time since the summoning, Tsunade could swear Mikael was smiling.

"I suppose it is why I like Dark Souls in the first place." He sounded nostalgic, and Tsunade settled in to hear a story. If all she could do to ease the pain was listen, then she shall. It was why she became a medic. "I enjoyed the combat, the immersive world, and the profound lore. If that had been all, I think Dark Souls would have been a good game, but it wouldn't have become the cultural icon it did later. You have to understand the central conceit of the game. Everything can be overcome. No matter how hard things get, how many times you die, or what you face, you only lose the game by giving up."

"Sometimes giving up is the right choice," Tsunade felt the need to point out.

"I am not disagreeing that letting things go can be a better option than clinging to them." He shook his head as if frustrated that she didn't understand his words. "This was a video game. There were no stakes. It was a hobby to enjoy. It was known for being difficult but always possible. To beat the game, all you needed was a will to carry on. Combat was exhilarating, but the joy came when you hit a wall. When you face a foe so tough, tricky, or outlandish that you throw yourself against them time and time again only

to fail. Then suddenly, you succeed. You find a trick, raise your abilities, or simply get good. No matter how you do it, you finally succeed in breaking down that wall. That shot of endorphins was like nothing else back then. It suddenly felt like everything was possible. That there was nothing you couldn't do."

He gestured wildly as he spoke passionately on the subject. Some others might have looked down on him for getting so energetic about a hobby, but Tsunade was entirely pleased by it. It wasn't childishness that killed ninja. It was apathy. Like always, though, when discussing a passion, it was essential to keep them on track.

"That sounds nice, but what does that have to do with hollows? They are mindless undead, correct?"

"They are not mindless," he clarified. "They are will-less. They retain all their abilities, technique, and intelligence. They know to ambush and plan, to kill and rob. They even still know how to practice religion. The difference is that they do these things because it is simply all they know to do. They have given up on progress, on achieving anything meaningful. Anyone, literally anyone in the entire world, could have achieved what I did back in Lordran. They could have defeated all the same foes, killed the gods, defeated Gwyn and linked the fire. I was lucky enough to know it was possible and to have good teachers, but I was way more unprepared than anyone else. It took me a few decades where it could have taken a competently trained fighter much less time. I succeeded only because I never gave up. I only gave in at the end."

Mikael trailed off, looking melancholy once more. Tsunade thought urgently to try and keep him talking. "You were repeating it so often I thought it was a common phrase. I remember hearing something similar a few times when you summoned me."

"Though this world is dreary, drifting from one apocalypse to another, it isn't without its bright spots." He explained. "A few people who are always pleased to see you can go a long way. I tried my best to give those as good an ending as possible. One of them, in the original game, had a line. It was a throw-away thing, never intended to blow up the way it did. Every time you stepped away from him, he would bid farewell by saying, 'don't you dare go hollow.' It is at once a plea for your continued existence and affirmation that you are not facing this world alone.

Dark Souls, when it first came out, wasn't super popular. It was a cult hit for the longest time. Large enough that you didn't know everyone in the community but small enough that you would see some familiar faces every once in a while. People talked to each other on message boards, piecing together the lore and telling stories. It got around that, while the game never cured it, it helped people with depression. The idea of overcoming anything can help people who feel just getting out of bed in the morning is

challenging. People would share their stories and end them with a message to the community. Don't you dare go hollow."

"That sounds nice." Tsunade wished something like that could have been possible in her world. By their very nature, ninja jealously guarded their secrets, and the idea of opening up anonymously to others would have turned their souls.

"I've been lucky enough to not have depression in my life. I've had my ups and downs, been in depressing situations, and even faced my mortality a time or two but never been clinically depressed. But I have had friends and family who have been. Something as innocuous as a video game, no matter how good, can be so life-affirming while being so dark. I have always found that beautiful. That saying, 'don't you dare go hollow', stuck with me for over a decade before I was trapped in that cell. Before Gwyn and… the fire," he looked almost nauseous as he said the words. "It was something I repeated to myself over and over as a way to push forward. Now, since I cannot stay dead, go hollow, or give up, I suppose I do not need to anymore."

Seeing his mood drop, Tsunade turned the subject once more. She asked about this new land, she asked about his family and friends, she asked about anything and everything. By the fourth time she changed the subject abruptly, the med-nin was sure Mikael had wised up to her moves. He simply smiled softly at her and went on to explain the history of his homeworld as she had asked.

They stayed in that stone gazebo, in that grass field, for hours. Just talking, taking what comfort they could in each other's presence.

When Tsunade's time was up, the grey portal opened by itself behind her and started to subtly drag her, Mikael was looking better. Not happy, but more secure. Less like a sobbing wreck. He stood as she did, ready to face whatever challenges this new world, not with a smile but with a will.

Tsunade would have hugged him if she could, but all she could give him were some parting words. She stared into his eyes as the portal swallowed her, willing him to understand that he was not alone.

"Don't you dare go hollow."

Author's Note:

Oh boy, oh boy, where to begin. Tsunade was a bit of an odd one to write. At once a matronly figure as well as a war weary veteran. She has been a subtle player in this game and that will continue for a little while yet, I think. The time isn't quite right for her true worth to shine even if I am happy how this chapter turned out.

First of all we are getting answers, finally. Not all of them but a good chunk. Emma is still bound but a work around has been found. I wonder how many of you caught on to that little tidbit from Priscilla's chapter about the time difference? I try to make sure every chapter builds up on each other to tell a consistent story and that involves copious amounts of foreshadowing. I think I am addicted to it, actually.

Second of all, this marks a turning point in the relationships of the characters. Part 2 isn't just the period where Mikael is in DS2 but when the women of the island go from somewhat passive participants to active elements. They still cant help him directly but now will move to achieve their goals in a more active setting.

Thirdly, this chapter is by far the heaviest when it comes to setting up the rest of the story. I've laid the ground work for almost the entire rest of the 'prologue'. Expect a few twists and turns, the characters are still missing a lot of information, but the framework has been set. I actually had to rewrite a few parts in order to not give away too much. See if you can spot all the seeds I've planted.

Finally, Mikael. His exact reasons are still unclear, though we now know more about his circumstances. I will be delving deeper into them in later chapters.

This Author's not has been longer than it really should be but I have been overwhelmed with all the positive support and engagement you all have brought to the table. I look forward to the comeing weeks and months, we are nowhere near done yet. I will have the next half chapter out by the 27th. I wish you all a great weekend.

ISOLATION II

Of yellow leaves and gossamer
in autumns that there were,
with morning mist and silver sun
and wind upon my hair.

If she could sweat, Medea would be dripping with it. So intense was her concentration that all else faded. She saw not the room around her. All senses were focused on her craft. One wrong move, one errant twitch, and the consequences would be disastrous. A mistake at this juncture would set her back days, to say nothing of the frustration and pain it would cause.

Success would bring glorious achievement.

Failure, utter ruin.

But she was Medea.

One of the greatest witches to ever live.

She had carved her name into bloody legend through her deeds and actions.

So with a hand that did not shake and a gaze that did not waver, she carefully slid the last piece into place. The Witch of Betrayal stepped back to admire her work.

“Finally,” she whispered to herself almost reverently.

After weeks and months of toil, her masterpiece was complete.

“It is an impressive beast.”

Medea, the Witch of Betrayal, one of the most significant magic users the world had ever seen, the figure of awe and terror, let out an undignified ‘Eep’ and tripped over herself as she fell backwards in surprise.

“The detail work on the scales is exquisite, and its eyes hold the ferocious cunning I would expect of a dragon.” Artoria continued, unmindful of her friend’s unexpected fall. She continued to eye the construct appraisingly. “I feel that the scale is a bit off, however.”

“I couldn’t keep it at a 1-to-1 frame. Otherwise, it would throw off the composition. Mikeal’s body is just too large.” Medea wiped herself down as she stood. Though surprised, she appreciated the blonde’s silence while she worked. Unlike her workshop, this room wasn’t kept locked. Had the king interrupted at the wrong time, her magnum opus could have been damaged.

She really needed to practice with Haki more.

The diorama stood exactly six feet tall, a few inches taller than the King of Knights and several more than Medea herself. It depicted a tremendous white dragon suspended in

space, floating through magic. Its wings were unfurled, and it roared in triumphant ecstasy. Clutched in its claws was a great jewel. Two figures sat atop its back, between the six great wings and nested in an opening of spikes. One was a blonde woman in armour wielding a spear. Behind her, clutching the blonde in an embrace, was an elfin woman with blue hair in a white dress.

Medea stared at her creation with pride. This would have been impossible in her original world. She never had the time she wanted to indulge in her hobbies, unlike on the Island. Not only that, the material use was frightfully indulgent.

The jewel, the size of her head, was made of a composite of gemstones and enchanted to refract light in a beautiful spectrum. It had been formed by feeding a crystal lizard all those gemstones and mana over months. It was a material never seen on earth before. That was the least costly part.

Each scale of the dragon, thousands of them, had been carved from actual drake scales. Modern magi would have sold their heir, crest and all, to get a handful of them. Its fangs, proudly displayed as it roared, had been formed from those removed from one of the hydra's heads. Medea had asked Scathach to carve runes on each of the scales and fangs. Its body could stand up to one of Artoria's attacks, and should anyone touch the mouth unprepared, they would die a slow and excruciating death.

Its eyes were formed from the actual eyes of the hellkite drake, shrunk and repurposed. Though they possessed no unique ability, they had been enchanted to follow the path of anyone who approached, making the dragon come alive. The figures on the creature's back, barely a few inches tall, were also made from expensive materials. Artoria's hair was literally spun gold threads. Their clothes were made using the magic-infused silk of the spiders that had appeared on the Island. The 'space' the dragon floated in was made from cut 'darkness' Raven had provided. Every 'star' and 'galaxy' on the tapestry was woven from crystalized starlight. Astromancers would weep at the sight of the background alone.

The materials alone would have allowed Medea to purchase a country. And not a small one either.

Altogether, using magic lost and made by some of the most extraordinary women to walk the world? It was quite literally priceless.

"I spoke of my figure," Artoria explained as she gestured to the tiny knightess. "I do not believe them to be that prominent."

It took a moment for the witch to understand her intention. Once realization came, she turned from the depiction of King Arthur to the actual woman and stared at her. At her chest in specific.

“They’re to scale,” Medea said, her eyes not leaving the mounds that had attracted her attention like gravity. “Trust me, I was very… thorough.”

“If you are sure,” the blonde did not seem to notice the focused attention of her friend. Instead, she continued to look over the diorama. “And what of this figure. Who is this meant to represent?”

Not understanding what Artoria was talking about, Medea turned her attention to where the lancer was pointing with great effort.

There, in the great beast’s mouth, was a third figure. Unlike the two women on the dragon’s back, it had been created with little care. Dirty blonde hair, ragged clothes made from scrapes, it could have been a handsome man had its face not been painted in a rictus of agony.

“Oh, ignore that,” Medea said casually. She reached up for the little blond fop of a figure, removed it from the dragon’s jaws, and tossed it over her shoulder with little fanfare. “I use it to help me focus. It always lightens my mood.” As Artoria did not look convinced, the witch promptly changed the subject. “So, what did you need me for?”

“Yes, well, ah, that is,” Artoria stammered, her face flushing red at the question. She averted her gaze but managed to continue. “It has come to my attention that I have been neglectful and ignorant. I seek to rectify that at the earliest convenience. I would ask your aid with this task.”

“Sure. What can I do to help?” Medea answered happily. She hoped this was going where she thought it was. Could the day get any better?

“I shall just speak the truth then.” Artoria took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and looked into Medea’s eyes again. “I have discovered I have romantic feelings for Sir Mikael. I do not wish to be left behind when we are free. I intend to court him with the intention to wed. I need your aid to do so.”

It was all Medea could do not to squeal in joy. As it was, she had to physically restrain herself from pupping a fist in triumph. She settled for grinning happily. That earnest delivery, those deep green eyes set in resolute determination. Medea felt her heart flutter at the sight but managed to squeeze out a response.

“What brought this on?”

“I admit, I have been fond of Sir Mikael for a while.” Medea had noticed that Artoria had taken to calling the man with that respectful title since they had held that meeting weeks ago. She thought it was due to a subtle competition the blonde held with Priscilla. “While lesser men would have decried the injustice of his plight, he has never maltreated us. He is steadfast in his quest and has become a valiant fighter. Had he been present during my reign, I would have been proud to have him counted among my Knights of the

Round."

"That is high praise," for a person to be worth joining the round table of legend was a high honour. Especially if they came from the modern world. It would mean he was guaranteed a place in the Throne of Heroes. "But I meant why the sudden romantic interest?"

"Ah," Medea noted, due to academic curiosity only, that the flush this time crept all the way to Artoria's chest. The king continued her explanation. "I had been talking to Diana, and she mentioned that the impetus to venture from her home island had been an encounter with a man washed on the shore. They later were romantically entangled, though not wed, and I inquired further on any current object of affection she might have. She mentioned in jest that the only options she currently had were the ten of us women and Sir Mikael."

Medea blinked at Artoria in surprise. Did the blonde not understand that Diana meant she was interested in Mikael? Not only that, but did she not realize the Amazon had also declared her interest in Artoria?

"That response caught my attention." Heedless, the King of Knights carried on. "I spent some time pondering the topic and why it disquieted me. I then realized that my emotions towards our summoner differ from those I held towards my knights. While I knew this, their exact nature eluded me until I remembered Sir Lancelot's poems regarding his love affairs. The desire to remain close to him. The intention to hold him in my arms. The aching pit the idea of his departure leaves in my stomach. All these and more have led me to conclude that I wish to court our summoner."

"Then why come to me?" Not that Medea was opposed to it. Far from it. She would have to thank Diana later. This put her ahead by months of her initial estimation. The only unfortunate thing was that she kept her documents on the 'The Plan' in her workshop. She would have to revisit them at the earliest opportunity. "My marriages did not end on a particularly happy note."

"I am seeking all the advice I can receive," the blonde admitted with shame creeping into her voice. "Though I feel bad to say it, especially considering the tragic result of your first marriage, I still feel your experience would be of more use than mine. Had I not been such a terrible spouse towards Guinevere, perhaps Camelot would have continued for centuries. Even then, it had been a union for politics rather than love. I have no experience with romance at all. Considering my masculine form, I am not in a position to turn down aid."

Medea stared at her friend, her eyes roaming over her form in disbelief.

Legs that carried on for miles, thick thighs held up wide hips that, in turn, supported

an ass you could bounce a coin off of. Her waist was trim, her stomach lightly toned from exercise, and her breasts were the stuff goddesses were jealous of. Her long hair flowed like silken gold and framed a face that was prominent with a hint of softness. Her eyes were like emeralds glowing with golden light.

Saying nothing of her cute personality, Artoria was a figure countries would war over.

Coming from a greek, that was quite literal.

Medea laughed. She couldn't help but do so. The juxtaposition of the severe mood of the knight and the humour of her last words set the witch off into a fit of giggles.

"I'm sorry about that," the witch apologized, still giggling behind her hand. Artoria's eyebrow had twitched, but she showed no other response. "I simply found your last statement to be too amusing. You are a gorgeous woman Artoria. Anyone would be lucky to call you their own." The king's annoyance was gone instantly, and her blush had returned full force.

"I appreciate your words Medea," the blonde looked away in embarrassment. "However, I must make all efforts if I am to convince Sir Mikael of that. Many of my knights have liked love to a battlefield. I am severely unarmed and understaffed and would ask your aid in the coming conflict."

"Hm," Medea hummed playfully. Finger on her lips, she smiled up at the blonde. There was an opening here. "Are you aware of the other generals on the field?"

"Excuse me?" Artoria looked perplexed at her words.

"Indeed," the witch nodded sagely as if revealing the world's truth. "I cannot speak to Robin, Raven, Emma, nor Tsunade, as they keep their battle plans to themselves. Yoruichi and Scathach have already stated their war aims, however. They intend to take Mikeal to bed at the earliest convenience. Glynda, a new general in the field, has developed a crush on the target. Though inexperienced, she calls on Scathach for aid. They make a powerful coalition. Priscilla has already staked a claim. Diana, despite her desires, can be swayed to our side."

"So many strong foes," Artoria whispered as she stared into the distance. Then her eyes widened and refocused on Medea's own. "And your intentions?"

"I, of course, remain your ally in this war." Medea smiled guilelessly up at her friend. "Not only will I help Diana come to our side, but I shall act as your leading advisor in the conflict. Together, we shall form a triumvirate and be triumphant." Artoria's eyes shone positively with competitive joy before they calmed and were serious.

"If this leads to discord, it might be more prudent to hold off on the attempt." The blonde looked pained by the admittance but continued on. "My kingdom fell due to infighting. I do not wish that my actions would again lead to such an event."

“Ah, but my king,” Medea practically purred as she sidled up to her friend and crush. “That is all within my plans. I aim not for a drawn-out war but a bloodless victory.”

“Is it possible to learn such tactics?” The king of knights looked so hopeful, Medea almost ‘squee’d at the cuteness level.

“Some may consider my tactics to be… unnatural,” Medea admitted slyly. “But those are only for those too ignorant of the world. I am sure you have heard of romances between two women. Diana was not joking when she listed the other women on the island as possible interests.”

“Such a thing is possible?” Artoria’s face was a deep scarlet, and she hung, wide-eyed, on every word. Had she known of such things, perhaps her marriage with Guinevere would not have ended so tragically. Luckily, Professor Medea was here to teach her.

“Not only possible but common,” the witch explained. “During my time, heterosexuality was mostly the norm for procreation, and the same sexes were meant to find pleasure in each other. Without men for thousands of years, I imagine that was all Diana knew before leaving her island. Even here, I have noted Yoruichi and Tsunade disappearing for a while for some… intimacy.”

“Re-really?” Artoria gulped. Her entire body was now the colour of a beet.

“Indeed,” Medea whispered. She was practically flushed against her companion. “I know Diana has taken Scathach and Yoruichi to bed on occasion. I suspect our dear Celt has been teaching Glynda a few things as well.”

“How does this help us win over Sir Mikael?”

“Why fight an enemy when we can turn them into allies? Our victory condition is getting Mikael to be interested romantically in you, is it not? To have him take you with him once we are free?”

“It is.”

“Then we shall use honourable diplomacy to negotiate with foreign powers to achieve a common purpose. Some concessions will have to be made to ensure all parties receive appropriate benefits, but such is the nature of war!” Medea said with finality as she stepped back from the lancer. Artoria was still flushed red, but she looked resolute and determined.

“I shall thank you in advance, Medea. With your wise counsel, I see us winning a complete victory!”

“Of course we will. But first, we must arm ourselves.” The greek stepped further from the blonde. Behind her new diorama was a pair of doors that she threw open. Lined on each side were numerous articles of clothing in various styles and colours. Coincidently, they should all fit Artoria. “As a caster, I should always be prepared. My armoury is at

your disposal, my king."

What perfect timing. Medea had just been thinking she needed a new project. Forget a diorama or lost magics; this would genuinely be her pinnacle achievement.

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"Time is weird here," Mikael explained. The pair sat atop a tower overlooking a ruined fort of sorts. The belfry commanded an excellent sea view as the full moon illuminated the couple. Medea had been ecstatic to have such a romantic spot for their meeting. Granted, Mikael made a point of showing the more beautiful areas of the world to all the women on the Island. She suspected that he wouldn't allow them to see the worst parts. Still, Medea would take what she could get.

The pair had spent the last few hours talking, laughing, and (to her not-so-secret delight) bashing all the gods they knew about. As it turned out, Mikael was philosophically an agnostic but realistically an atheist, as he put it. He did not deny the possible existence of gods, merely that humanity would be better off without them and that, if they did exist, mankind should act like they don't. The topic had turned from Cronos and why he was an idiot to the nature of time in this world.

"It has degenerated and warped. Take this belfry, for example. No matter how long we rest here, the full moon will never rise nor fall. Other places are perpetually bright or bathed in the setting sun. It was the same in Dark Souls 1."

"Is this related to the convergence?" She subtly leaned closer, trying to show off her curves and make it seem accidental. She hadn't known where she would be summoned, so she had gone for a catch-all outfit. A dress that showed generous cleavage but wouldn't be out of place on an afternoon stroll.

"Maybe," he shrugged. He either didn't notice Medea's movements or pretended not to. "Things are different than they were in the games. Larger, more complicated. In the game, the degeneration of time was used as an excuse for multi-player and summoning aid. The areas didn't change because they had not been programmed to. What is natural and a byproduct of an end of a cycle is hard to differentiate."

"If time has deteriorated to the point where its natural flows are disrupted, then it would follow that space would too." Medea pointed out while casually brushing a lock of hair behind her ears. "If the cycle of destruction and repair happens enough, it would eventually collapse from a build-up of damages. As it nears the end, revolutions would happen quickly, and past events and people would overlap with present ones. If hollows do not need sustenance and lack a will, they probably would not even notice."

“Something like that happens in the third instalment. Not only do all time periods converge, but old Lords of Cinder rise from their graves. Besides calling upon them to link the fire once more, other aspects of their time period are called with them.”

“You’ve used that term before, ‘Lord of Cinder’. What qualifies one for the title?”

“The basic requirement is to link the flame.” At Medea’s expression, he continued. “That essentially means defeating all who stand between you and the kiln where the first flame resides, absorbing their souls in the process and making your own much greater for it. There are other ways to do it than fighting, but they all boil down to having a powerful enough soul that can act as kindling for the flame to last an eon.”

“Like you?” Medea asked softly. Though her partner couldn’t feel it, she nonetheless put her hand on his.

“Like me,” he nodded while grimacing. A full-body shudder ran through him at the memory. “I have died a hundred different ways, none of them pleasant. The First Flame, becoming a Lord… it’s something else entirely. It burns not your body but your soul. The stronger the soul, the longer it lasts. It is a searing agony, torture so extensive that it literally drove gods mad. It goes on and on for centuries, millennia. You do not notice the time passing. You do not see the world-changing. All you can feel is agony. Your body only moves instinctually because your mind is so consumed with pain. It only ends when someone comes to kill you and take your place. It drives everyone hollow eventually.”

“Not you,” she tried to reassure him.

“I would have, had I not had out-of-context benefits from my elements driving me forward. I do not even know who replaced me. I was too blinded by the pain to see. I do not think I put up much of a fight.”

“And you have to do this two more times?” Medea asked fist clenched in anger and frustration. She relaxed when she saw him shake his head.

“I know I won’t have to in the third game. I am going to put out the fire for good then. I hope I won’t have to here either. There are always two possible endings. Either you link the fire and become a Lord of Cinder, or you walk away and let it fade. Even if you walk away, someone will eventually come and link it because it will never go out completely.”

“Then why didn’t you do that last time?” Medea asked hotly. She hated seeing him in pain. The first time she had been summoned after his fight with Gwyn, he had been a wreck of his former self. She had been helpless, unable to aid him in any way. It was one of the worst experiences of her life.

“I didn’t know it would work out like that,” he defended. While he had recovered somewhat since he was still far less prone to laughter and jokes than before. “The games

end after you link the fires. Yes, you get burned, but it fades to black afterwards. I've been burned to death dozens of times. Once more would have been a small price to pay for freedom. On top of that, the other ending is even more ambiguous. It is just walking away. There is no explanation of what happens. It is supposed to be an 'age of darkness', but that never happens until the third game. I couldn't take the risk that it wouldn't qualify as 'completing' the game."

"I hope you know that if I could hit you, I would." Medea took a deep breath to calm herself. "I know you do not want to die. I know you are doing the best you can. But we care about you. I care about you. Seeing you like this, throwing yourself into danger and pain while we sit on the side, is driving us mad. So please, take whatever steps you need to but try and keep your deaths to a minimum."

"I'll try," he looked uncomfortable at her earnest plea. Medea cracked a smile. Mikael was weak to positive feelings directed at him for his prickly sides, sarcasm, and dark humour. He used his personality like a sword and shield, never letting anyone in. Earnestness, the witch had found, would be the key to his heart.

"Good! I do have a question, though."

"Shoot," the man looked relieved for the change of subject.

"If you were conscious and 'alive' for that whole process, how come none of us were summoned?"

"I wasn't in the right frame of mind to catalogue things, you understand," the witch rolled her eyes at his sass but smiled. "I think it's based on how I learned to delay the summonings. Much like you all, I can feel a summons coming before it happens. I have to be looking for it, but it is there. It starts to build up like a well of energy ready to burst. It gives me about a day's warning at that point before any of you appear."

"It is the time dilation between places," Medea confidently said. "A few seconds on the Island is a few days here. The ratio is inconsistent except for whenever we are summoned. I have been able to measure that on our end. I think whatever is causing the summoning is doing it when the flow of time is closest. That happens when the sun is up on the Island at three-hour intervals."

"When did you figure that out?"

"I had the data I needed within the first week. I was only missing the knowledge of how much time more time passed on this end compared to the Island. If only someone hadn't lied to me about it only being a week." The greek playfully glared up at Mikael. The man only turned to the side and whistled innocently.

"In my defence," he said with a guilty smile. "When we started, it was only a week between summonings, as far as I could tell. It is only when I consciously delay it that it

roughy quintuples."

"You never finished your explanation on that."

"Right, so a well of energy starts to build up about a day before a summoning. Essentially, I try and focus on not releasing that energy. It is annoying, like having gas in your stomach but no release. After about an hour, the feeling goes away, and the energy subsides. It will stay with me for the next few weeks, not making any movement but eventually, it starts to build again. It gets to the point I cannot contain it and have to let it out. That energy never built up while I burned."

Medea stared up at him, searching his eyes for any indication that this was another one of his pranks. There was no humour in them.

"So," she started slowly as if talking to a child. "We are being summoned across time and space, likely through some use of the second True Magic, by a magical fart."

Mikael raised his finger to defend his point, lowering it again after a moment of thought.

"You know, I never thought of it like that. You are right." Realization seemed to dawn on him, and he smiled widely. "Are you saying my farts are the farts that will pierce the heavens? That it is the one fart to rule them all?"

Medea collapsed into a fit of giggles. It was low-brow humour of the worst sort. Childish in the extreme. It was such a Mikael thing to say, to make something so serious sound silly. Medea loved it.

"You are the worst," she said between chuckles.

"I think I'm funny, and that is all that matters." he pouted at her before grinning.

"I'm glad," Medea said after her laughter died.

"Hm?"

"That you are no longer pushing us away." She explained. Ever since he had come back from the kiln, he had stopped trying to shoo them away. Before, he would talk to them for a bit and then leave. While they could follow, he clearly didn't want them to. Now, he spent time with them. Not only her but everyone from the Island would spend as much time with him as possible before being called back.

"I'm sorry," he winced, looking down at her. Medea hated the pain in his eyes but loved the concern they showed when they looked at her. "I'm being selfish. I just got so lonely and missed you all."

"No, continue. In fact, I wish you would go back to the three-hour interval summonings." Mikael shook his head at her words.

"I won't. It would take too long then. As it is, you all will be trapped there for at least a month more for this game, and who knows how long for the 3rd."

“Fine, but at least take breaks. No matter how long it takes, I’ll be waiting for you.” She stared deep into his eyes. He looked away.

“You know I cannot return your feelings.”

He said the words softly to her. In other circumstances, Medea would have felt hurt. She would believe it was due to her past as a witch. That she was being judged. Medea knew Mikael enough that he meant it literally when he said he could not return her feelings.

He physically could not return her feelings.

The exact reasons continued to elude her, but she suspected it had to do with whatever Emma was still commanded not to reveal. The greek was already working on that.

More than that, Mikael had chosen her.

He had known her history, her deeds as the Witch of Betrayal. He knew that her Noble Phantasm was the one thing that posed a threat to his command seals, the only means of control he possessed. He willingly gave up on multiple forms of mind control that would have made what Aphrodite did to her seem like a child’s prank.

Despite all that, he had still chosen Medea.

Is it any wonder she would feel this way?

“You can’t for now,” Medea corrected. When Mikael tried to respond, she held up her hand. “As I said, I’ll be waiting. We will. I look forward to the day you can look me in the eyes and say these words to me.”

She stood, opening the portal back to the Island. She looked at him as he stared at her in shock. She needed to be blunt and earnest. Otherwise, he would continue deflecting. So she said the words that she knew to be true within the first month of the summoning.

“I love you.”

Medea would deny it till her dying day, but she enjoyed leaving him speechless for once.

Author's Note:

I had so much fun writting this one, I smiled the whole way through. Things have been pretty serious so a lighthearted chapter was just what the doctor ordered.

On the subject of bisexuality, the greeks were well known for it so I think it makes sense for Caster and Wonder Woman. Also, Medea spent a lot of time on Circe's island, you cannot tell me there was no hanky panky going on there. Same for Diana and Themyscira. Artoria is also, cannonicaly, bisexual but prefers men. Yoruichi would sleep with anything hot enough, I think. As would Scathach. I imagine the celt seducing Glynda in the name of 'training'.

I took a stab with Tsunade sice her only canonical romances were male, but I can imagine kunoichi not being too selective in who they find comfort with. None of these women are prudes, though some are more experienced than others. Do not expect them to jump into bed together but they do know what they want and are mature enough not to judge.

2-2 draws to an end and we see what I meant when I mentioned that part 2 was when the women would take more active steps. They still can't affect the world but they can draw Mikael closer towards the relationship they want. It's not going to be smooth sailing but they will for it. And that is what part 2 is about, the evolving nature of their relationships.

I had always intended Medea to be the first to fall in love. We sometimes joke about consent being the best fetish but to her consent is THE fetish. Mikael pokes her buttons perfectly, even without any lures. He is a) a bit morally ambiguous without being an asshole b) not a pretty boy c) had the chance to mind control her and didn't take it and d) doesn't like gods of any sort (this last one is a recently discovered bonus).

Again, canonically she fell in love with Soichiro for much less than this over the process of a week. I've been slowballing her to give the characters more room to breathe.

QUESTION CORNER I

Q: Diana is explicitly and religiously a virgin in the majority of depictions of her, devotion to Artemis and Athena has strings attached. Whether those strings necessarily extended to woman would require someone more well read then I but certainly she doesn't have a single casual bone in her body. It's a serious relationship or nothing. Tsunade…I sincerely doubt it, just because she had a dangerous job doesn't mean she's magically interested in anything pretty with a pulse. No one knows jack shit about Yoruichi and her actual sexuality.

A: I know. As I mentioned this isn't canon timelines for any of them. On top of that I am trying to divorce the characters from their media to an extant. Japanese Waifuism has very strict demands on what can be considered a 'relationship' and I am trying to present the deathworld that is Naruto as a place where romance and marriage still exist but people, especially shinobi, take comfort where they can.

A similar principle for Diana. For all that she is a feminine Icon, she was made in 20th century america by a bunch of white men. They too had some very clear ideas on what sort of woman she should be. She also worships aphrodite, which does have some rather libertarian views on sex. My take is this; when it comes to a relationship she can be as monogamous as the next woman but is not limited in her view. Remember, she is thousands of years old. While the island is female only, 'Mans World' is not. Shes seen some things.

Q: Damn Medea ! I mean we all expected the harem but General Medea, grand Magus of Love, was a suprise for me.

A: Cry havok and let slip the kittens of war!

QUESTION CORNER II

Pull up a seat kiddos. Time for Uncle Reading to answer some questions.

Q: Disgusting. What a harlot. A fetish befitting an Ancient Greek!

Jokes aside, I love how wholesome this has been. As much as Dark Souls is about death, it's also always been about comfort, at least to the players. You keep spinning that warm feeling up the right way, to 'never give up, skeleton!'

I am curious how Yoruichi sees all this. Tsunade's PoV gutted me when I realized she was comparing Mikael to Jiraiya and all the other dead men in her life; as completely blindsided as I was, I'm guessing there's something similar in Yoruichi's background that I've missed and that'll also get me catching feels. That, or she's just gonna cat.

A: Thank you, I love the Soulsborne series because of how much it emphasizes overcoming challenges. It is inherently dark, but I try and interject some humour and fluff when I can. It's difficult when the MC and Waifu can't interact but I am trying. As for Yoruichi and others, their viewpoints evolve with the rest of the cast but their exact nature won't be explained for now. Safe to say that even when we do not see out of the character's eyes, they still have things going on. It's been a challenge not to drag on this Prologue (we're not even halfway done yet!) with extra chapters. I might do side stories or omake's in the future to clarify it. As it is, I am limiting myself to show parts that push the story forward so it doesn't bloat too much.

Q: You really had me on the ropes at some point but god damn am I glad I stuck around, I hope we get more involvement, especially in Dark Souls 3 because of the familiar faces. I'd love for them (like Andre and Patches) to remember him as Lord of Cinder because that'd be some hilarious reactions especially in the Dreg Heap when Patches realizes he's survived to the end of the world. I hope we keep stuff similar to Priscilla (where it's their POV for their interaction)for every capture (like our favorite masked swordswoman of DS2) I'm surprised he didn't the Spider sisters though. Hopefully Anri will be treated and done right considering Mikeal's basically already stated he's going Usurper (because letting it die would only let that shit restart and the only way to activate end is to steal that shit).

Would love to see Yuri realize that her "Lord of Hollows" is actually a Lord of Cinder, twice over. Wonder what kinda of light Freide will be painted in. The first thing Mikeal is going to do is probably get blind nun Waifu right the fuck out of that cell, then promptly right the fuck out of that wet, filthy corner (because she doesn't deserve to sit there). There's a just bunch of good Waifus ahead like Witch Waifu, and Dragon Waifu 2 Electric

Boogaloo (who doesn't even understand her own miracles and the only reason her Covenant even keeps it's purpose is because said purpose is written in their miracles as it's keep from Yorshka.

A: You have no idea how tempted I have been to introduce new DS waifus. The chaos sisters, Ciaran, Lucatiel, the herald, and Pretty much the entire cast of DS3 are top of my list too. Unfortunately, what I mentioned at the start of the fic holds true. This won't be a 'collect them all' style fic, no matter how much I wish it were. Priscilla was a bit of an exception, the exact reasons will be clear before the end of DS3. There are very good reasons that Mikael has not gone out of his way to capture more. If he did, I would need to change the entire plot and it is a bit late for that.

Q: Seeing the character being all edgy as fuck makes me wish that the Waifus could knock some sense into him. Although I wonder if the whole madness thing in MC's mind is from one of the Catalog Defenses or if it's some Eldritch fuckery from Bloodborne hanging around in his mind.

A: This is something that bugs me as well. I knew when I started writing RR I knew that it would be a more serious take on the WC formula, that was kind of the goal. But I also did not want to lose the wish-fulfillment aspect of it. Soulsborne is inherently 'edgy', there is nothing I can do about that and Mikael's situation is shittier than most. I have tried to shift tones when I can (the Medea chapter in particular I was grinning the whole way through). Expect more lighthearted moments here and there, especially on the island but I cannot promise things will not stay pretty serious until the end of the 'prologue'.

This is why I consider it a 'Prologue' to begin with. the 'Main Story' will be much more light-hearted and fun. Expect copious amounts of fluff, enough sweetness to give anyone diabetes, and more debauchery than Dionysus, Sanguine, Ishtar, and Loki in a whore house. I can only hope I can write the story well enough that the payoff is worth it.

Q: Because for all that they use a specific kind of "soul magic", general "magic" is not real there, worse still since they have it down to a science. For us with an objective point of view we see both as magic, Yuroichi pointedly doesn't see "soul magic" as magic.

Edit: I just realized his elements being Freedom and Life make him conceptually immune to marriage.

You were the first to catch that, internet cookie to you. Monogamy was never on the table for Mikael. I will say that even he doesn't realize all the implications of his choices just yet. They are going to screw him over so hard (in a fun way, nyuk nyuk) You were also right about the magic. To us, anything supernatural seems like magic. To these people, who grew up with systems that seem mundane to them, magic is something that defies their common sense. The easiest way to compare them is in Nasuverse; Magecraft is

‘something achievable’ while Magic is ‘Miracles that do not make sense to our system’.

ISOLATION III

I sit beside the fire and think
of how the world will be
when winter comes without a spring
that I shall never see.

Glynda watched Priscilla weave around her foes.

The dragon girl winced as a crystal weapon struck her side but managed to swing her scythe through the construct. Her unique ability, Lifehunt, instantly drained all magic, Aura, and Haki from it, and the humanoid figure fell to pieces on the ground. Glynda focused for a few moments, four more crystalline figures attacking the hybrid while the teacher reassembled their fallen comrade from scratch.

Strictly speaking, using her Semblance to construct and move the crystals as a humanoid figure was inefficient. Glynda would see greater success in a real fight by piloting the pieces individually. But this was training for both herself and Priscilla. The dragon girl needed more combat experience, and Glynda needed finer control with her much-improved senses.

Could she construct and pilot the puppets faster than Priscilla could destroy them?

Glynda had discovered that the answer was yes, so long as Priscilla was her only foe. Her burgeoning Observation warned her of an incoming attack, and the teacher managed to tilt her head to the side to avoid the arm that appeared.

Introducing Robin to atomic theory had been a mistake Glynda regretted almost instantly. Apparently, her flower-flower fruit needed a foundation on which to 'bloom'. Once she realized that air, and other fluids and gases, were made up of the same materials as solid objects, she had taken to forming her appendages in mid-air at a moment's notice.

This caused her no extra strain, judging by the pirate continuing to read her book from several hundred yards away.

This distraction cost Glynda as her control over her forming construct waned, and Priscilla managed to destroy three more in a matter of moments while turning invisible.

Not that it helped.

The atomic theory had also aided Glynda, which was why she had pointed it out to Robin. Using the mix of Semblance and Observation Haki that quickly became her primary tool, the teacher felt the molecules of air being displaced and had her remaining constructs, all seven of them, attack the unseen woman.

Not expecting it, Priscilla took a few hits. Though it was blocked by her Aura, Glynda

was happy to see the dragon girl recover quickly. More than anything else in the field, adaptability was what saw hunters survive the horrors of the Grimm.

The spar continued for another quarter of an hour before the combinations of Robin's interference and Pricila's fighting managed to down all enemies simultaneously. By that point, the dragon girl had lost her Aura and was bleeding from a few places.

Tsunade sat on the sidelines with Robin and watched the various training fields and had her patched up in moments.

Taking the chance for a breather, not physically tired but mentally strained, Glynda watched the others spar.

Artoria and Diana, the two strongest fighters of the women, decimated the landscape with their duel. They kept it within manageable levels so Medea could repair the field later. Artoria did not release her Noble Phantasm, nor did Diana employ her various blessings. The only techniques they used, besides their burgeoning Haki and skill, were their summoning skills. Artoria fought side by side with a massive lion made of lightning. It was a skill derived from one of her knights, one of many as Glynda understood it.

Diana, by contrast, led a small team of aura constructs. The amazon's Semblance, they had discovered, allowed her to summon images of other women from her home island of Thymescria. The absolutely massive lion towered over half a dozen of said constructs. This was a battle between an Ursa and a pack of Beowolves. Either of these women would have been one of the greatest huntresses ever.

Glynda did not envy them. She merely respected their strength and appreciated their skill. (The part of her who had spent many a night 'learning' from Scathach also appreciated their beauty.) Instead, the huntress envied another combatant.

The reason this group training session had become an almost daily occurrence was faced off against Scathach. Emma was sweating with exertion, while the Celt looked barely the worse for wear. For all that the pair were the same Tier, the blonde was a much less experienced fighter. In fact, the group had been rather shocked when, at breakfast one morning, she had asked for training.

More than happy to help and get to know the White Queen better, many other women had pitched their support for the idea. Everyone was expected to join whenever a group training session was ongoing. All the women took turns learning from one another in various fields, bringing them much closer than the disparate groups and cliques they had been before.

That still didn't help the pang of envy Glynda felt at seeing Emma, in her diamond form, dodge a strike from her opponent and respond with a punch from a fist coated in black. It wasn't her fighting abilities but her raw talent with Haki that the huntress

wanted.

Apparently, Observation and Armament were very complimentary towards her natural mutations, and the psychic had picked them up like a duck to water. Already she was as good as Glynda, despite having trained only a fraction of the time. While nobody had yet achieved the ability to predict the future or attack internally just yet, the huntress suspected that Emma would overtake them all and be the first. Baring Robin, of course.

"It is pointless feeling jealous," the pirate looked up from her book to tell the teacher. "Compared to the people of my world, you all are progressing at absurd rates. Even my captain, a monster of talent when it came to Haki, took years to where you all have reached in months."

"So you've told us," Glynda knew she was making significant progress. She knew it would be a slaughter if she faced off against herself from four months ago. "It is simply our nature. Humans are always envious creatures. It is only by self-discipline that we can control ourselves."

"What a dark way to think." Though she said it, Robin smiled at the blonde.

"Get your grub, everyone," Yoruichi yelled, calling a halt to the ongoing spars. The mocha-skinned woman was followed by Raven, who floated a table covered in food towards the group. Looking over the food, Glynda felt her stomach rumble. It seemed like Yoruichi had once more cooked some dishes from her homeland. They were a particular favourite of the blondes.

Taking a seat besides Artoria, who had practically teleported to the table, Glynda filled up her plate in a much more sedate manner than the King. Once again, the food was exquisite, one of the best parts about being trapped on the Island.

Once Glynda had polished off her second plate and emerged from her food trance, she took a look around. Artoria was, of course, still going strong with a pile of dishes at her side. How she could eat so properly yet so quickly, Glynda would never know. The others were talking, Scathach advising Emma after their most recent bout, Yoruichi was telling a bawdy joke that had Robin giggling and Priscilla looking scandalized. Raven sat quietly, eating to the side while Tsunade healed a few cuts and bruises that Diana had accumulated. Unlike her foe, she didn't have an artifact of incredible power that healed her instantly.

"Glynda?" Medea drew the huntress' attention from across the table. "It's your turn at 3, right?"

"It is," she answered simply.

"Would you mind asking him to collect a few more of the red fans the desert sorceress use? I need another dozen or so for a project," the witch explained.

“Of course.” It would be no trouble and an excellent chance to repay the witch for indulging in the huntress’ more ‘creative’ requests for clothing.

“I appreciate it.”

“What is the nature of this new project?” Artoria had taken a moment to pause in her gluttony to ask the question.

“I’ve been studying the nature of fire in that world,” the greek explained. “It is such a key concept that I figured that if I could learn more about its uses, I might build a Bonfire on this end that Mikael would be able to travel to.”

“Any success?” Glynda couldn’t help the hope that crept into her voice.

“None so far. I have been able to replicate most of the pyromancies Mikael knows of, even creating a few of my own, but Bonfires are another subject entirely. From what he has explained, they are made by burning humanity, the spiritual fragments, and the undead to act as kindling. Since nothing ‘alive’ can travel through the portal but us, I have tried various materials to replicate it. So far, I have seen the most success with the fans of the sorceresses. I don’t think it will be what I need, but everything I learn now can help.”

“Is there any way I can aide you?” Artoria asked seriously.

“Not right now.” The witch shook her head, looking regretfully at the King. “Your help evaluating the dragon materials was appreciated, but this work is a bit delicate.”

“Then I might be of assistance,” Glynda offered. The elfin woman eyed her for a moment in contemplation before responding.

“You don’t have circuits, so the magecraft itself will be beyond you. But your Semblance could help with construction. Aura might be able to help as well since it is soul-based, like many things of that world. After you return from Mikael, drop by my workshop, and we’ll see what we can do.”

“Very well,” Glynda returned to her meal. She vaguely noticed Medea and Artoria gesturing to one another in silent communication before the King addressed her again.

“Glynda,” her fellow blonde leaned in as she spoke in a whisper. Her face was red and wouldn’t meet her eyes. “I have been made aware of some relationships I wasn’t privy to before. It is true that you and Scathact are entangled… romantically?”

“What of it?” Though her face flushed, Glynda fought to keep her voice even. If there was one thing you learned while teaching super-powered teenagers, it was to never let them see you squirm.

“I meant no insult,” Artoria hurriedly replied, still keeping her voice down. “I simply have no knowledge of such subjects and was curious.”

“Oh.” While the huntress had never been worried about judgement from her peers on the Island, a weight did ease from her at the lion king’s words. She thought they had been

discreet. Her face was still flushed, and she squirmed awkwardly in her seat, but she did answer. “What would you like to know?”

“Ah,” Artoria had clearly not expected the question as she looked to Medea for help. The greek witch, the only one within whispering distance, was watching the conversation with a smile. Seeing no help from the bluenette, the knight turned back to the teacher. “I suppose I would ask what brought it on? It wasn’t common in my day, though I hear it is so in different cultures.”

“Well,” Glynda shifted awkwardly in her seat, trying to find the most diplomatic way to explain. “It wasn’t uncommon where I come from, though not the norm. I confess to having no experience with romance either, so Scathach has been a great help. Even if she can get a bit… wild.” Medea grinned harder, and Glynda’s flush deepened. The witch had been the one to provide the pair with many of the ‘tools’ they had requested.

Thank god for Aura and its healing effects.

“Pardon if this is too delicate a question.” Artoria was still red-faced, but she stared at Glynda thoughtfully. “I was under the impression that you were interested in Sir Mikeal? Do you intend to pursue him or Scathach?”

“Can it not be both?”

Two pairs of green eyes stared at each other for a moment. A perverse giggle interrupted their focus. The pair turned to look at Medea. The witch barely noticed. Instead, she continued to stare. Looking down, Glynda realized why. To remain quiet, the pair had leaned closer. In their visual confrontation, they hadn’t noticed that their considerable busts had been pressed against each other. The image was certainly one that could inflame lust.

Realizing the same thing, Artoria leaned back with an awkward cough.

“Again, I meant no insult.” The lion king explained. “I would simply like to know if you would be opposed to working together to ensure success in our mission of courting Sir Mikael?”

“You mean you both are trying to seduce him?” Glynda asked, though she already knew the answer. The huntress had long given up hope of anything exclusive with the man. Scathach, she had come to find, could be very persuasive.

“We have already enlisted the aid of Diana and Priscilla,” Artoria said with all seriousness of one of her students handing in an After Action Report. “With your and Scathach support, we will command a majority force of the Island’s inhabitants. Yoruichi, too, is an object of recruitment. The remaining four have not shown nor declared a romantic interest in our target yet. Should they do so in the future, with our superior numbers, we would be able to enlist them to our aid if they proved agreeable. Should they

attempt a solo action, they could be hindered by our coalition."

"I am not opposed to working together," Glynda said seriously. Neither Scathach nor herself had much luck in swaying Mikael's determination to leave them once they were free. "I would just like to make one thing clear."

"Very well," Artoria looked relieved that the conversation was drawing closed. She continued eating throughout the talk, and her large meal was almost done. "State your terms."

"It is not required to be romantically involved with each other, correct?" While the huntress was fearful/hopeful of the answer, having recently discovered the pleasure of sapphic love, she would not be pressured into anything. What happened would either happen naturally or not at all. Though she wouldn't say it aloud, Glynda was a romantic. Recent changes, non-withstanding, of course.

Artoria choked on her food. The lion king flushed a deep scarlet as she hacked for air. The other women of the Island looked over at the struggling blonde before returning to their conversations as she got her breathing under control.

"It is, hack, not a requirement, no."

Glynda let out a long breath before flushing again at Medea's following words.

"It is a bonus."

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"What is your fascination with high places?" Glynda couldn't help but ask.

The pair were sitting atop a cliff in a small refuge. Majula, she believed it to be called. It was a hub for refugees and those who remained sane, serving as a waypoint between several important stops in this kingdom of Drangleic. This wasn't her first time summoned to the small collection of battered houses. While Mikael had shown the Island's women some beautiful sights over the last few months, Glynda could admit this little village's calming influence was something she enjoyed. They had been talking about their childhood over the last few hours when the question came to mind.

"It is not so much high places themselves as the views they can give." Her companion for the evening gestured out over the ocean, the setting sun painting it a vision of warm colours. "The world is a different place when viewed from up high. You see farther, little details are lost, and there is a tiny bit of fear in your stomach, no matter how protected you are from falling. That feeling is one of the only things that has remained the same for me after all these years. Even if I return from death, the primal instinct that fears the fall remains the same."

“So it reminds you of your humanity?” She tried one of the tactics Medea had recommended, brushing her shoulder close to his. Though they couldn’t touch, it was supposed to make him aware of her presence more than anything else. Much better than Scathach’s and Yoruichi’s recommendation of being summoned naked.

“Yes, but it is more than that.” Mikael did not talk loudly, nor did he care to whisper. His even tone was still loud enough for other residents of the small town to look over at him askance. Glynda could imagine what they were seeing. A strong undead holding a conversation with thin air. They must think him mad, or at least close to hollowing. Mikael did not care and kept up the discussion.

“High places help me think. I’ve always preferred broad ideas rather than getting bogged down by minutia. Some people like getting every detail right, but I like comprehension over memorization.”

“I cannot say the same. While I enjoy wide views, I prefer having all the I’s dotted and T’s crossed. If we are too lax with the minutia, errors eventually accumulate.”

“I imagine that happened a lot at Beacon?” He grinned at her, and her heart fluttered a bit. That stupid grin of his. Her emotions didn’t show on her face.

“Managing the budget alone took weeks. None of my colleagues could write an accurate report or requisition form to save their lives.”

“Ah, the wonders of bureaucracy! We need it because the world is complicated, but we hate that we do. Trust me, I feel your pain. The next person to complain of lack of inventory, despite never requesting the items in the first place, I am going to throat punch.” Glynda stared at Mikeal in surprise.

“I wasn’t aware that you worked in such a profession before.”

“I did have a life before all this, you know?” He deadpanned at her. “I wasn’t rich, but I was still a relatively successful businessman. I’ve worked in pretty much every aspect, from sales, supplies, management, and human resources to advising positions.”

“I cannot imagine you in a stuffy boardroom with people like the Vale Council,” Glynda giggled into her hand at the image. Mikael was irreverent, sarcastic, playful, and laid back.

“Really?” He looked surprised at her words, as if not understanding her disbelief. “I could be formal with the best of them. I was often accused of being boring, working too hard, or taking things too seriously.” Glynda’s giggling almost erupted into full-blown laughter, but she used her considerable self-control to stifle it. Mikael? Boring? She briefly wondered if it was a cultural difference between the two worlds.

“You will pardon me if I don’t believe you.”

“I’m serious,” he insisted. “I think it’s because you all have a distorted view of me. It’s

partly the lures' fault, but I haven't been precisely trying to be formal either. You all see me when I am relaxed, not focusing, nor do manners matter in this world. I've been treating you like I would close family or friends. Why wouldn't I? When we first met, I had been trapped in a cell for a month and had nothing to lose. I am a much different person in a professional setting."

"If you say so," Glynda said the words but wasn't focused on them. Instead, she fought the flush rising to her cheeks. Like family?

"You'll see," he shook his fist comically in the air at her as if decrying his vengeance against this grave insult. "You'll all see! I will prove how boring I can be! Just watch!"

"Do you plan on returning to the business field when free?"

"Hm? Not really." He thought about her question for a moment. "Depending on the worlds I visit, I will probably do something to get some local currency, but that would be it. One of the main reasons I invested so much into the dragon perk tree was to get the ability to travel between worlds at my leisure rather than depend on Company restrictions. There is just so much to see and do, you know?"

"Like what?"

"I want to return to a version of my home world, only in the past. A lot was lost over history that I would like to learn about. I want to visit your world too, see the shattered moon and the Grimm lands. I want to visit a world covered in the ocean. I want to see various afterlives, meet and talk to famous figures. I want to watch a world be born and see the end of time. I want to try various cultures' food, see their festivals, and observe their wars."

Mikael talked at length about the various things he would like to see and do. He stared out over the ocean, his voice drowning with longing as he spoke. Glynda's heart clenched in sympathy for the man. While they were all trapped, in one form or another, it bust be excruciating for him considering his Element.

"… feel the Force flow through me and pilot a starship. I want to go where no man has gone before. I want to watch heroes and villains live their lives with all the joys and sorrows it brings. I want to fight gods and monsters, visit the fey, destroy an undead horde or two, and even take a dip in at hell."

"It sounds like you have a long list," Glynda interjected as he took a breath.

"Too long to count," he nodded. "The Waifu Catalogue, the challenge the story I wrote was based on, was more often than not used as an excuse to write wish-fulfillment pornography. Don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with that, and many of the stories were good despite it. I just never found one that I thought really captured the spirit of pure joy unlimited multiversal travel could bring. Sex is great. Magical sex with your

favourite characters would probably be even better, mind-control excluded. But even without it, the catalogue had so much to offer. That was one of the reasons I wrote the story. I liked to imagine somewhere out there was a version of me enjoying a never-ending journey."

The pair sat in silence for a quiet moment, enjoying the setting sun, the sounds of the surf and the crackling fire behind them.

"What about you?" Mikael asked after the moment was over. "Do you have any plans when you get home? You're immortal now and will be stronger than Salem by the time you get there. You have a genuine chance of ending the Grimm threat. Even if you can't kill her, you could still trap her so deep in the earth's crust that she would never be a problem again."

"There would be no point. She's already won." Though her voice was even, Glynda could not help the despondency that filled her at the memories.

"What?"

"Salem acquired all four relics," the blonde explained in a monotone. "She summoned the gods, and Remnant is long gone. She is as dead as the rest of the world." There was a long moment of silence before Mikael spoke again.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

"Don't be. It's not your fault." She wiped the bit of condensation in her eyes before continuing. "In a way, I am glad that you summoned me. Even if my world is dead, I know a form of my friends and colleagues live on in other worlds now. They are not the same people, but I like to think a bit of their souls live on as well."

"I could drop you off on one of those worlds," he offered. "You could see them again."

"While I wouldn't mind a visit, that is not where I want to spend the rest of my time." Glynda stared Mikael dead in the eyes, wordlessly willing him to understand her intentions. He grimaced and looked away.

"You know I can't do that," he said. "It wouldn't be fair to you or me. I can promise you what I promised Scathach. You can stay with me until we find a world you like. After that, it will be goodbye. You will be free to visit the Island and see the others there, I couldn't stop you if I wanted to, but I probably would never stay."

"Isn't the Island attached to you?" Glynda narrowed her eyes at the undead man.

"It is," he agreed. "But I do not know what is going on inside of there, nor am I compelled to visit. It would be nice to have a rest stop whenever I wanted, but I can leave it for you all to use as a base."

"So what," the teacher asked harshly. "You get your freedom, dump us at the first chance you get and then never meet again?" Mikael looked resigned at her words but

nodded.

“That is the plan. Finding the worlds will probably take a bit of time, but it shouldn’t take too long.”

“You think any of us will be happy with that?” Glynda’s self-control was all that kept her from snarling the words. “That Medea won’t use her entire arsenal for hunting you down? That Scathach and Artoria won’t join hands to kick your ass? Do you think we won’t spend years on that Island pestering you till you give in? Guess what? Many of us have nothing better to do with our lives, so just give in!”

“You think I want this? Any of this?” He almost shouted at her. The other residents were definitely watching them now. Glynda noticed more than a few take steps away from where Mikael sat. “In any other circumstances, I would love nothing more than to have you all with me. Even if nothing romantic happens, I like you all enough that travelling with you would have been a joy. I chose you not only because you were beautiful but because I thought we would all get along. That working together would be fun rather than a challenge.”

“Exactly!” The huntress interrupted his tirade. “You chose us. Now you have to live with the consequences of your choices.”

“I am,” Mikael replied. Far from being angry, he looked desperate. He almost begged her to understand him. “I would love to fall in love with you all. To spend eternity travelling with you by my side. But I can’t. Every second you are with me is a joy and torture. A constant reminder. My only hope is to drop you all off so you can live a happy life and never see you again. It is not fair to you, I never claimed it would be, but it is my only hope at this point.”

“Then why all this?” Glynda waved a hand between the pair and then around the scenery. “Why spend so much time with us? Why be nice to us and do everything you can to make our lives easier? You work with Medea to get materials to make us stronger. You taught us that we could use Aura and Haki. I know you’ve pushed Emma and Raven to be more sociable. You can’t claim to not like us when every action you take is in direct opposition to your words.”

“I never said I do not like you all,” Mikael sagged in despondency, and Glynda’s gut clenched at the pitiful sight. “Just that I can’t fall in love with you. I still want what’s best for you, and it costs me nothing to help.”

“Then why do you not push us away? Many in your place would have taken action to make us hate them to ease their guilt.”

“I’ve always said I wasn’t one of those emo edge lords.” A sad smile played on his face as he looked up at her, and Glynda realized she had stood up at some point in their

argument. “I’m selfish. I enjoy good company when I can get it. I tried that whole walking away thing in Dark Souls 1, and it barely worked. Some of you started developing feelings, no matter what I warned you about. When I chose a bunch of headstrong women, I knew we would disagree about some things. I deliberately decided not to exert any form of control. That is the thing about Freedom. It is not Freedom from consequences. It is knowing the consequences of your actions and choosing to make the decision anyway because the opposite is worse.”

Glynda did not know how to respond to that sad face of his, not trusting herself to not say something to make it worse. When the grey portal opened after a few moments of silence, she stepped through it, wiping her tears as she did.

Author's Note:

A little downtime, seeing how the women spend their time. I still managed to seed a few things here and there but I wanted a more lighthearted moment after the gut punch last time. Glynda is a bit tricky, a serious woman with a heart of gold and a sense of romance.

Speaking of which, though some women have and will engage with each other romantically, do not expect everyone to jump into bed with everyone else. They all have their preferences and some might not even like women.

The second half fought me a bit.

I am really looking forward to getting to the main story. For those worried that I am dragging things out too long (such as Mikael still keeping secrets), almost all will be answered in part 2, with only two 'major' mysteries left. One will last the whole of the prologue, seeing as it is its main core, but the other will get answered pretty quickly.

Thank you for all the feedback guys and galls. For those in Canada, Happy Canada Day. For those in the USA, I will wish them a good holiday weekend.

ISOLATION IV

For still, there are so many things
that I have never seen:

in every wood in every spring
there is a different green.

Artoria's day began, as always, at 6 am sharp.

She woke up as the sun rose. Long years of ingrained habit had not waned even on a utopian Island. Though seasons were still present with the jewel, they did not change the time the sun rose and set, 6am and 8pm, respectively. Five months into their imprisonment, the refreshing spring winds had been replaced with the summer heat. While the temperatures never reached uncomfortable levels, it still encouraged many women to spend time at the beach or in the pool.

Artoria had plans to do just that this afternoon. Today was a rest day; the group's training took a break to unwind. The King of knights was to be summoned in the evening slot, so she had the rest of the day to do as she pleased.

Since it was a rest day, she only spent two hours practicing her forms and training with Haki.

Laxity was the enemy, after all.

She spent the following hour caring for Dun Stallion and Sir Yvain's lion to unwind. While both were magical constructs, much like herself, they enjoyed the physical aspects of being summoned. So she fed them and brushed them, to their great pleasure.

Artoria then joined the other women for breakfast around 9. Meals were always lively, with various women coming down at different times. Medea had taken cooking duties upon herself to ensure everyone got the supplements they needed to keep progressing in their Tiers.

Sometimes Artoria worried that the greek witch was working too hard. She always seemed to have multiple projects and hobbies running simultaneously. Not counting Medea's recent help with The Plan. Only the ever-present smile on the elfin woman's face stopped the King from bringing up the subject. Compared to the Island's early days, she looked much happier.

While at breakfast, Artoria checked with Diana about her most recent summoning since she had the morning slot. Her habit was asking after Sir Mikael to make sure he was never too vexed in his quest. Her heart still clenched at his situation whenever she

pondered it. To her, they had spoken only two and a half days ago. To him, it had been almost a year.

Diana reported that Sir Mikael seemed in high spirits. This portion of his quest was nearing completion. He hoped to fell the last enemy within a fortnight on their end. Three and a half years to go then.

Artoria could not wait for his quest to come to a successful end. Even her knights, who left Camelot on long quests, were never gone longer than a few months. The Isles were never so long to navigate for all their problems during her reign.

After a hearty meal, only twelve servings since it was breakfast, Artoria set off upon Dun Stallion to explore the Island with the lion by her side.

The group had mapped the Island early on in their incarceration. Upon discovery of the 'Creature Feature', Artoria had taken to journeying across the land in search of any new beast or territory. The Island not only summoned foes that Sir Mikael had encountered in his quest but adapted the environment to match them. Last week, the King of Knights had discovered a volcano teeming with salamanders.

King Arthur enjoyed these hours of calm exploration. They reminded her of simpler times before everything fell apart. Camelot would hear tell of a strange beast or errant Knight, and she would organize a Hunt with her knights.

Sir Agravain would try to keep everything on track but spend most of his time corraling the others. Sir Gaheris would wrestle his brother, Sir Gawain, away from cooking duty. Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristan would find the nearest village and seduce some lonely women, only to be chased out of town by their husbands in the morning. Merlin would be in the middle, stirring up trouble while Cath Palug and Sir Bedivere either cleaned up the mess or struck down the mage.

Sir Mordred would argue with Sir Galahad over the former's recklessness or impropriety. Sir Percival or Sir Palamedes would be focused on the actual quest, inquiring for details from the passers-by. Kay would laugh through it all, never taking things seriously for a moment, teasing her relentlessly.

Artoria missed those days.

Before Sir Lancelot's betrayal. Before Sir Mordred's rebellion. Before Camelot fell and her knights died. Before Camlann. Before her ineptitude had doomed her friends and confidants.

She saw the shadows of their faces sometimes.

Kay's laughter in Yoruichi. Gawain's steadfastness in Diana. Agravain's dependability in Medea. The nurturing care of Gaheris in Tsunade's eyes.

But they weren't her knights.

Artoria did not know what to call what they had on this Island. They were all friendly enough, though some were closer than others. Robin remained helpful, though distant and kept her thoughts to herself. Raven was incredibly anti-social and stayed in her room most of the time. Emma was getting better, more willing to engage with the others. Before, she went out of her way to avoid them.

The rest spent most of their time together. Playing, laughing, watching shows, and sometimes just spending hours on end talking. They all had lived full lives, gone on their own adventures, and gone through tragedies and victories. Artoria had come to care for each of them as friends and companions.

The Knight flushed red as she remembered Medea's explanation of how some of their relationships were not as platonic as she had imagined. Looking back, it was a bit obvious. The lingering touches and the subtle looks. The way Tsuande and Yoruichi would curl up together on a couch or how Scathach and Glynda would arrive at breakfast simultaneously. She would be lying if she said that the idea wasn't exciting or… titillating.

For now, however, her heart remained set on Sir Mikael. This courtship was very important for their future relationship, convincing him of the folly of leaving her behind. Artoria, with Medea's aid, had already negotiated a settlement with the other Island women interested in their summoner. Diana, a dear friend, had agreed to help quickly, even if she wasn't interested in Mikael herself. Scathach, Glynda and Yoruichi had gotten on board as well. They all agreed a concentrated effort would be needed to break down his defences, even if the following relationship would be non-exclusive.

None of this would have been possible without Medea. Artoria owed a lot to the witch and tried to find ways to repay her debt.

Her blush deepened as she thought of ways to 'repay' the beautiful woman. But, the Knight shook her head at the thought. So far, Medea had shown no interest in romance while on the Island. Just because the greek had admitted her culture's acceptance of bisexuality did not mean the Artoria could presume Medea's interest in her.

Returning from her wandering thoughts, the King of Knights took stock of her surroundings. Dun Stallion, the wise beast he was, had taken them westward while avoiding both contaminated areas as they followed the coast. Artoria had explored the poisonous swamp and gas-filled mine exactly once before deciding to never venture there again.

It would have been quicker to fly, but details were often lost from the air. The entrance to the labyrinthine tunnels that had appeared under the mountains, for example, was only visible from the ground. Besides, she was in no rush. This was a day off, after all.

The following hours were spent wandering the countryside. Artoria found no new

discoveries, though she did hunt a few crystal lizards she spotted for Medea to study. These were red rather than the usual blue. Of course, the knightess was back at the mansion in time for lunch.

During the meal, the topic had turned to their home worlds and whether or not they intended to return.

“Servants are already dead,” Medea explained to the group sitting around the table. “The three of us do not have anything to go back to. Mikael could still find worlds during our periods, but they wouldn’t be the same. the Second True Magic can fake it well, but it is not the Fifth.”

“I, on the other hand, fully intend to return,” Emma said. “I have a school to run. I shudder to imagine how the others have set things up in my absence.”

“God forbid they do something right,” Yoruichi snarked at the diamond blonde good-naturedly. “I’ll probably touch base with a few friends, make sure Kisuke hasn’t destroyed anything, Soul Society is still standing, and my Little Bee is all set before returning to the Island. Galavanting around worlds sounds much better than dealing with paperwork because they want me to be a captain again. Or, god forbid, a noble.”

“Some of us take our jobs seriously, you cat,” Emma responded archly. Yoruichi, the picture of maturity, stuck out her tongue in response.

“I suppose it would depend,” Diana chimed in before the argument could escalate. “Raven and I were summoned at an inopportune time. While it did save our lives, we have no idea of the state of things. More than likely, when we return, we will be needed for reconstruction efforts.” The hooded woman nodded her agreement but kept focusing on the meal.

“What was the nature of your foe?” Artoria couldn’t help but ask.

“We were facing an army of Shadow Demons. They marched for a being called the ‘Anti-Monitor’ or some such. To be honest, we never saw the leader. I hope others of the League managed to hold out, but the earth had sustained heavy damages by the time we fell.”

“My condolences,” Artoria bowed her head towards her friend. “If you wish, once we have convinced Mikael to remain, I would be willing to aid in your reconstruction efforts. While my prowess is suited to the battlefield, any help I can provide is at your disposal.”

“I appreciate it,” Wonder Woman smiled softly at King Arthur, placing her hand over Artoria’s and giving it a gentle squeeze. “I do not know if time passes differently between my world and here. It could be months since we left, or it could be decades like Mikael’s experiences. I only fear that our return will be too late to be of any help.”

“Hm,” Robin made a quiet noise of contemplation on the side as she watched on.

When a few eyes turned to her, she smiled and shook her head. “Do not mind me. Just had an errant thought.”

Artoria may not have been able to read minds like Emma, but she had good instincts. Those same instincts warned her that whatever errant thought had crossed Robin’s had been important in some way. More than that, judging by the brittleness of her smile and the slight shaking of her cup of tea, it had not been a pleasant thought.

Casting a subtle eye towards the White Queen, Artoria noted that she hadn’t reacted, which calmed her somewhat. Emma was good at hiding her expressions, but she had her tells. On the other hand, Raven had flinched and was staring at Robin. Her face was, as usual, expressionless, but there was an intensity to her gaze.

“And how about you,” the cambion asked the pirate. “Any plans for when you get back?”

“I suppose it would depend on the situation there,” Robin idly ran a finger around the rim of her cup as she stared into the distance in thought. “I still have to achieve a few things, which I can only do there. I want to see my crew again, make sure they are all safe and help them with their own dreams that hadn’t been accomplished yet.”

“You will visit, will you not,” Priscilla asked. Until then, she had been explaining the healing Miracles of her world to Tsunade. Now she stared at Nico Robin in hope. The pirate looked surprised at the question as if she couldn’t understand. “I will miss you all, but you can all visit by summoning a portal.”

“Certainly,” she answered softly after a moment. “If for nothing else than the library. If you would like to visit, I’m sure many of my crew would love to meet you, I’m sure. Though feel free to ignore any inappropriate questions from my captain, musician, or cook.”

“Inappropriate how?” Glynda asked. The blonde teacher had taken it upon herself to instruct the crossbreed in various subjects and was very matronly with the girl.

“Sanji would flirt heavily,” the pirate listed things on her fingers as if going through a checklist. “Luffy would ask you if you poop. Brook would ask to see your panties. The others would all think you the coolest. Yamato, in particular, would probably idolize you.”

“You’ve told me about your crewmates before,” Tsunade said thoughtfully. “I never gave it any thought, but meeting them would be nice if we could travel to each other. I would love to ask your doctor, Chopper, I believe he was called, about his herbal concoctions.”

“I’m sure he would love that,” Robin said warmly before turning to Artoria, who had just finished her fifteenth serving and smirking playfully at her. “How about you, Your Majesty? Over half of the women here have claimed your legend to be the most well-

known in their world. I've read a few books on the subject as well. Any of the famous Knights of the Round Table I would like to meet?"

"If we find a world in which my Knights remain, then there are few things to keep in mind." Artoria set down her bowl of rice, looking around the room to ensure everyone was listening. This was important. "Sir Agravain hates women due to his mother, so it would be best to steer clear of him. Sir Galahad can be a problematic sort to talk with. In particular, Emma, Medea and Robin should avoid him, but the rest should have no issues. Kay might be a bit lackadaisical, but he is good-natured, and Yoruichi will find his company enjoyable. Sir Gareth is a delight to be around. Out of my knights, they and Sir Bedivere would be the ones I recommend talking to.

"Those are the least troublesome. Let me tell you why you should steer clear of Sir Gawain, Sir Lancelot, Sir Tristan, and the rest. Medea, Scathach, Tsunade, and Emma. This is particularly important for you."

"Why us?" Emma looked morbidly curious as she asked the question.

"You have been married or widowed in some manner," Artoria answered handily.

The following was half an hour of lectures on how to survive the Knights of the Round as a beautiful woman. Her audience listened to her in awed silence, only asking the occasional question. (Such as why all her knights ended up cross-dressing at some point)

"Finally," Artoria ended her lesson gravely. If they learned nothing else from her words, let them remember this. "No matter what, never engage with Merlin. Do not talk to him; certainly do not listen to his advice. Do not accept anything from him, definitely not food or drink. And if nothing else, never ever be alone with him!"

There was a moment of silence as her companions digested her teachings. Artoria used this moment to sit back down and resume her meal. It was cold by this point but still good. Besides, she had worked up an appetite.

"Artoria," Medea finaly spoke. "You know you are my friend, and I love you to bits but, and I mean this in the nicest possible way; your knights were all insane!" There were nods around the table and various sounds of agreement. Artoria herself nodded in support.

Good. They had been listening.

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Artoria subtly adjusted her outfit. Medea insisted on it, claiming it would 'knock his socks off'. While a part of her enjoyed the chance to wear something like this and 'let her hair down', another part worried about what kind of image she was showing Sir Mikael.

He would not think her too loose a woman, would he?

She was lucky that he was not looking at her when she was summoned; he was staring out of the cave they were in. His feet dangled as he sat upon a ledge, and his hands rested on a long wooden box. She had a few moments to gather her courage, stepping closer to stand by his side. Like usual, the sights he displayed took her breath away.

The cave entrance was high on a cliff, a narrow pathway led upwards, but that did not hold her attention. Neither did the fantastic view of the sky. They were high enough that they were over the clouds and the horizon, bathed in gold, stretched on for eternity.

What held her attention were the drakes.

Hundreds of them.

The mountains of the Island now played home to their fair share of the winged reptiles, but they were of a different breed. Blue, instead of red. They breathed lightning rather than fire. And there were only half a dozen at any one time. Nothing like the magnificent display before her eyes.

Artoria watched, enraptured as a flock (Flock? Hoard? Murder? What did one call a group of drakes anyway?) of the red creatures, twenty strong, crashed into another. The battle was fierce, with blood, scales, and bodies raining from the sky. Neither side won. They were ambushed by a larger group of beasts swooping down from above.

Two more drakes flew side by side, a trio of tiny little fledgelings flapping desperately to keep pace with their parents.

In the distance, a drake the size of the Hellkite somersaulted in the air before diving beneath the clouds. Roars and cries filled the skies in a cacophonous din that shook her body with the sounds.

“Did I ever tell you why I chose the Dragon Heritage from the catalogue?” Sir Mikael suddenly asked. He continued to watch the skies. Artoria would have been a bit put out by it if not for the fact she was enraptured as he was.

“Not me personally, though I have heard from the others that it was due to the ability to travel between worlds it afforded.”

“I didn’t lie,” he explained. “You see, there were other ways to travel between worlds. One of them, ‘Trajectory. Agreement’. I believe it was called, would give me even better control than Dragon Break. I chose to ‘Be The Dragon’ despite it being inefficient becau-hrk.”

So lost in the wonder of the view was she that the King of Knights hadn’t noticed Sir Mikael turn towards her as he talked. His words had caught in his throat as he caught sight of her outfit. Artoria flushed in embarrassment but still stuck out her chest proudly as Medea had instructed. She had been insistent that the bunny suit would grab his attention.

The hungry look that dwelled in Sir Mikael’s eyes as he stared at her form led the King

to reaffirm that Medea's advice bore fruit once more.

He stared at her in awed silence for over ten seconds, his mouth gaping open. She fought not to fidget. She enjoyed the outfit, the ears in particular, but now that she was aware of her romantic intentions with Sir Mikael, it added a new feeling. A fluttering in her stomach. A desire to flaunt her body in a wholly new way.

"That is an… interesting outfit," he finally choked out. After a few more seconds of staring, he mastered himself enough to look away. Artoria would have felt disappointed had she not noticed the occasional glances he sent her way.

"Medea has been kind enough to aid me with my wardrobe." Though she was still flushed in embarrassment and joy, Artoria said the words calmly. "I cannot wear my armour at all times, and the mansions provisions are nice but bare. I admit, she has some rather outlandish ideas, but I have enjoyed more than a few. Do you… like it?" Her calm facade practically fell apart near the end, and she almost whispered the question.

"I do! I really do!" He nodded his head vigorously in answer before calming once more. "But you should be careful. I don't think Medea intends any harm, but she can be tricky." Artoria narrowed her eyes at the man. She knew the siege on his heart would not be won easily, but she hadn't expected him to try and sow dissension in the ranks. Not that she would fall for it, particularly with her trusted advisor. Medea was so much better than Merlin ever was.

"Let me worry about that. You were telling me why you wished to be a dragon?"

"Right, got a bit sidetracked there," he muttered to himself. "I suppose it all started with a dream. A bit silly in hindsight, how much one dream decades ago could fundamentally shape who I was."

"If I learned nothing else from Merlin, it is that dreams can be mighty."

"Who am I to argue with Merlin," he said sardonically before continuing. "It was a silly dream. I was eleven, I think, and had just finished reading one of the Harry Potter books. If you aren't familiar, I'm sure the library at the mansion has them and the films. Despite my many problems with them and their author, it was an incredible story to me as a child. To make a long story short, people could fly using broomsticks as mounts in the books."

"Broomsticks?" She couldn't help but ask incredulously. "But they are so thin? How is one supposed to maintain a proper riding position?"

"Trust me, that was one of the books' most minor problems. But anyway, I finish the book and go to bed. I imagine millions of children had a similar dream of flying broomsticks. I wasn't playing quidditch, the sport they played in the books. I was just flying. It was a nice dream. But then the broom disappeared from under me. I panic for a

moment, vertigo taking over as I start to fall. If I had woken up at that point, I probably would have been a completely different person today.

"But I didn't wake up. As I fell, I started to fly with nothing below me nor above, just me and the sky. The rest of the dream is blurry. I do not know how long I flew, what sights I saw or even if I ever stopped. I remember two things. Waking up crying, whether in joy or sadness, I do not remember. And I remember that feeling. That pure, wonderful, exhilarating feeling of freedom." Sir Mikael no longer turned to look at her outfit. He stared enraptured at the beautiful dance of dragons in the sky. Artoria could identify that look in his eyes. Jealousy. Envy. A longing that consumes a man and drives him to madness.

She smiled, happy that he trusted her enough to confide such a personal moment of his life to her.

"I've been chasing that feeling my entire life," he admitted. "I've taken up skating, skiing, boating, gliding, and any other activity that could give me the craving I sought. The closest I've come to is boating during a storm at sea. The Waifu Catalogue, for all that it is designed with romance and sex in mind, drew me to the dragon aspect. It is inherently a wish-fulfillment idea. Don't get me wrong, the chance to fall in love with any of you is more than most could hope for. But the ability to fly under my own power? That was what pushed me to write that original story."

"But you are trapped," Artoria said somberly. Every day the women learned more about how terrible Sir Mikael's circumstances truly were.

"Yep," though he said the word in a chipper tone, his voice was wet with emotions. "I know there is a body out there, MY body, that has everything I could ever want. It is just floating in space while I am trapped on the ground. This place, this Dragon Aerie, stirred me up something fierce. If you trust nothing else, trust me on this." Sir Mikael stared at her, eyes not drifting below her own. He didn't look sad. He looked angry. "I will beat this world. No matter what it takes, I will get that body. I will fly!"

He stood suddenly. Standing up, he towered over Artoria by more than a few inches. She wasn't startled. She had sensed their interloper as soon as he did.

A drake, not of a size with the Hellkite beast she felled but large nonetheless, had spotted Sir Mikael. It was hundreds of meters above their position, and was diving at him fast.

Calmly and with a focus the King of Knights would be proud of, Sir Mikael removed his bow from his back. It was a simple longbow similar to the ones of her homeland. He notched an arrow from his quiver, its head crackling with lightning, and took aim.

A moment of stillness overcame the man as he held his breath.

In a flash, he released the bolt and his breath at once.

With her abilities, Artoria was able to follow the missile easily. Though it travelled hundreds of meters instantly, she saw clearly as it met its target. At the moment between wing flaps, the bolt lodged itself in the drake's yellow eye. It cried out in pain as it tumbled from the sky, falling from view as it disappeared beneath the clouds.

"A fine shot," Artoria praised. "Sir Tristan would be envious of it."

"It wasn't that impressive," he denied as he retook his seat beside her. Far from acting humble, Artoria realized he genuinely considered that skill to be 'nothing'. "With Martial Talent and decades of practice, even if bows aren't my main tool, anybody will get good."

"Maybe," she doubted that was the case, but that wasn't the critical point. "Even so, the effort you put in and the skill you now have are not to be denied. If others decry that 'I could do the same if I had talent', then let them look on in their envy. None of it should affect those who rise by their own merits. Talent and effort are two different things."

"Dealt with people like that a lot?" Sir Mikael asked curiously.

"More than I care to admit. More than once, I had knights apply for a seat at my table. When met with failure of some sort, they were quick to cry injustice at my ruling." While Artoria could not match the personal moment he shared earlier, she was happy to regale him with tales of her time at Camelot.

The following few hours were spent trading stories back and forth. Artoria would tell him of her knights and their misadventures, and Sir Mikael would speak of various ways they were portrayed in his world. While she had learned much from television and movies, their presence in games was new to her.

As Artoria opened the portal to return to the Island, she was stopped by her Knight's words.

"Just a moment," he said before she could step through. "I want to try something."

"Another test?" She asked in surprise. The fact that he was still attempting to find a loophole to his isolation was commendable. He hadn't given up after everything had fallen and decades had passed.

"Somewhat," he said as he slowly and carefully slid the box that had sat beside him closer to the gray portal. It was as long as he was tall, twice as thick, and made from weathered boards. This wasn't one of the bottomless ones he had shown before. He was careful not to jostle it. Once it was almost pressed against the rippling surface, he stopped and grinned at her. "You wanna see something cool?" He removed the lid.

Nestled inside, held softly in mounds of straw and cloth, were four massive eggs.

"Are those?" Artoria asked breathlessly.

"They are," he grinned at her expression. "I know living creatures cannot go through

the portal, but dead bodies can. I hope these eggs do not count as completely alive just yet. Two are for Medea, for her studies, but the other two are for you. I understand Camelot had something of a menagerie, but I do not think you ever got the chance to raise some drakes." He replaced the lid and carefully slid the box through the portal. It went in without issue. "I guess that answers that question."

If Artoria could, she would kiss the man right now.

She had to settle for staring at him with the same intensity he had when he first saw her in her bunny suit.

Author's Note:

Only a few things to say about this one. We learn more about Mikael and what drives him as well as a bit of setup for plot points in the main story. I hope I have conveyed that, far from being downtrodden by his circumstances, Mikael has never given up on finding ways around his situation. Does his situation suck? Definitely, but he hasn't given up hope. He is inherently optimistic.

That is about it for today. I'm working hard on the next chapters. Tomorrow is a full chapter release. For those who have been counting, there is only one woman left whose point of view we haven't seen yet. If the end of part 2 is set up for the fic, 2-5 will answer a number of questions and set up some more.

BTW Arthurian mythologies are so weird. I went down a huge rabbit hole, both Fate and History based, for this chapter and got sucked into the mythos. One of these days I will need to do an Omake about the Knights of the Round, just for the nyuks of it. Happy 4th of July to those who celebrate it.

Ps: Woot, got Castoria on my fifth multi-roll. I guess this chapter was a good catalyst after all. I hope everyone who is rolling has luck on their side.

ISOLATION V

I sit beside the fire and think
of people long ago,
and people who will see a world
that I shall never know.

"There is something wrong with you."

Robin's voice cut through Emma's mental wandering, bringing her focus back to her body. The mutant had set herself up in her favourite chair overlooking the beach from the cliff. It also provided the best view of the Dragon beyond. After a long day of practicing, she treated herself to a nice tumbler of Louis XIII. Cognac wasn't her favourite drink in the world, but she had only sipped it once when she was young and stole it from her father.

It was her personal mission to go through and sample a little of each of the mansion's considerable booze selection. It was almost tradition by this point. She would take her seat with a different drink each day. She would watch the sunset and then spend a bit of time persuing the minds of the other women on the Island. Nothing intrusive, but a daily check-up for anything of note.

"Excuse me?" Emma asked archly. The pirate had taken a seat on another of the soft chairs, her drink in hand. Coffee, not booze. Not for the first time, the White Queen wished she could read the brunette's thoughts.

As soon as Robin knew a psychic was in their midsts, she spent considerable effort learning how to block casual intrusions. With Mental Talent, it had taken a few weeks rather than years. Unless Emma was willing to put her full force of effort into battering down those defences, Robin's inner mind would remain hidden. She wasn't perfect, occasional errant thoughts slipped through, but she was one of four people on the Island who weren't open books to the White Queen.

"You heard me. There is something wrong with you." Far from sounding accusatory or insulting, the pirate sounded worried.

"In what manner?" Emma kept her voice level in feigned casualness. What had the observant woman discovered?

"Like you," Robin nodded to the blonde in acknowledgment. "I've kept my eyes on the others. Not when they needed privacy, of course."

"Of course." Tacit agreement passed between each woman for a moment before the Strawhat continued.

"And some things you've said and done do not line up. You've claimed on multiple

occasions that Mikael is mad or dangerous, but if that were true, you would not be able to tell us about it."

"I can't say anything about what I saw in his head," Emma clarified. "If I draw conclusions and put facts together using information externally obtained, I can say that. If I talk to him about subjects aloud, the restriction no longer applies."

"That's true and very clever of you," the brunette nodded to the point. "But that is not all. Artoria told us about her knights a few weeks ago during lunch. I had an idea. When I let the thought slip on purpose, you didn't react. Though you said you would be going back to teaching, not once have you ever made mention of it over the last month. Then I remembered you talked about a husband. Only you mentioned him in the past tense. Over the last few weeks, I've been doing independent verification just to be sure. Before their summoning, all the others, every single one, were in a situation that could lead to the end of their world."

For a moment, only a moment, Emma considered wiping Robin's mind. It was an errant thought but one that was, theoretically, possible. The mutant took pride in her high Tier. At 8, she was tied with a few other women but was only surpassed by Diana. In contrast, Robin was at the bottom, initially a 4 before being summoned and raised to 5. By this point, with the regular infusions of Mikael's blood at every meal, she was already Tier 6. Still two below Emma.

Unfortunately, while possible, it wasn't certain. It would be a race between whether the mutant could batter down the defences of Robin's mind or the pirate could sense it in time to snap her neck. Emma wouldn't stay dead, but the three days it took to reform would be long enough for the pirate to turn the other inhabitant against her.

More than that, Robin was Chosen.

The thought of harming her directly turned Emma's stomach. If Mikael ever found out… Just the idea was enough to make the mutant nauseous. So instead, Emma decided to be truthful. Maybe she could even spin this into a boon.

"You guessed right," the blonde responded seriously, her voice grave. "I had already put the pieces together."

"Then there is nothing left? Nobody left?" Robin asked sadly. Judging by the mist in her eyes, she already knew the answer.

"I'm afraid not," Emma shook her head in denial of that small hope. "We all come from 'Dead Ends'. None of us have anything to go back to. In some way or another, all our worlds have disappeared."

"I suppose I already knew," though Robin was crying, Emma was surprised to see her start to smile. It looked more like a grimace to the blonde. "Dereshishishishishishi.

Dereshishishishishishi."

The brunette laughed as tears ran down her cheeks and hugged her legs to her chest. For minutes, the laughing/crying continued. Once it started to die down, Emma wordlessly poured some of the cognac into another tumbler and slid it across the table to Robin. The pirate downed the drink, and when the blonde poured another, she also swallowed that one. It was only on the third pour that she sipped.

"Sorry about that." Her eyes were red and wet, her chest still heaved with sobs, and the hand holding the glass was shaky. Robin was back in control, though. "I will take time to properly mourn them later. I still have some other questions, if you don't mind?"

"Sure," she agreed softly.

"Does Mikael know?"

"He doesn't. He does about Glynda and the servants, but I kept it from him once I realized the full scope. He suspected something for a bit, but Scathach threw him off course. Mikael sincerely believes that dropping us off in our worlds would make us the happiest in the long run. He convinced himself of it." Emma stressed the word 'convinced', trying to get the point across. "He was looking forward to visiting your world in particular."

"More work around from external factors?" Robin asked, and Emma nodded. "So what exactly happened? Can you tell me how you know?"

"I can't say anything of what I saw in his mind." Not that she would. The memory still sent shivers down the mutant's spine and butterflies into her stomach. "The others, however, have been pretty open about their circumstances. Everyone either was dying or dead when summoned. Scathach was the only exception, and when she explained her circumstances, it threw him off the scent."

"What was different about her?"

"She didn't need to die for her world to end," Emma explained, falling into old habits. "Scathach exists in a perpetual 'what if' scenario. For a Servant to be summonable, they need to be dead. She never died. But she is here, which means she has to be dead. I am not as familiar with magic as others, but I've had dealings with it in the past. I think it is because she is a 'Lord of Spirits'. Magic loves that kind of ambiguity. The only times she has been summoned for their 'Grail Wars' were when the world had ended already, or magic had completely dried up. Since she doesn't remember magic drying up, the former is more likely. Mikael thinks she came from a timeline like the latter."

"So we are all undead then?" There was a sardonic smile on the brunette's face. "I can appreciate the irony of it. But this means something else. Are you able to talk about Patrons?"

“I can,” Emma nodded, glad to have someone intelligent to converse with. Too many fools were given all the needed information but could not piece it together. “Mikael told me about it a few times when I prompted him. I know pretty much everything about the catalogue that he does.”

“Death, then?”

“Almost certainly. Mikael casually mentioned that he never chose a patron since he didn’t see the point for a short story.” Emma gestured to the Island around them. “But his choices do not line up with reality. We have to assume that changes were not just limited to the Island, but other aspects as well.”

“So ‘Death’, or whatever they are, are behind all this? For what?”

“Who knows?” Emma replied airily. “That is beside the point. You cannot tell Mikael.”

“Why not? It should end his insistence on dropping us all off to go galavanting across the multiverse.”

“I cannot say.” At Robin’s disbelieving look, Emma continued to insist. “I really can’t. I can get around his Command by getting him to talk about things out loud, but he refuses to talk about some things. I can only tell you that, while his elements play a big part in his reasoning, they are not the issue’s core. I can only tell you that the idea that we can be, and will be, happy without him is important. If he knew that Death was his patron, he would come to some conclusions that would jeopardize us all. When I’m summoned tonight, I will try and get him to speak on the subject so I can explain to everyone tomorrow.”

“Then explain one final point to me.” The pirate’s eyes were narrowed in suspicion. “What were his actual commands? For all his prickly outside, he is smart. His first order wouldn’t have been something as vague and unhelpful as ‘regain your sanity.’ He wouldn’t know a loss of sanity was the problem. On top of that, he would hate controlling your mind directly like that. More than that, it takes one command seal to heal a servant completely. Two if you want them back in fighting shape. Three if you want to be on the safe side, but there would be no reason to use all four for that Command.”

Emma couldn’t help but blush at the memory. It hadn’t been her proudest moment. She didn’t regret it, but she regretted her naivety. The Emma of back then, the one only recently summoned to the Island, was a different person. That Emma had been a fool. It was a wonder at all that she was Chosen.

“His first order was to ‘Forget everything you saw in my mind.’ He figured memory loss was better than any mental manipulation since most people constantly lose and repress memories. No danger of personality death.” Robin gave an actual chuckle at the thought, and Emma blushed further when she realized the pirate had pieced together the

rest.

“Let me guess,” the brunette teased. “Once you realized your memory was tampered with, rather than let Mikael explain, you dived right back into his mind to find out what had happened.”

“He tried to stop me with another Command, but I had already gone deep enough. He then ordered me to ‘Stay and not do anything’ while placing the three orders you already know about. Since it was so specific, the stay order wore off after a few hours.”

There was only one lie in there. Out of the six seals, none had been used to try and stop her second dive. Emma couldn’t risk any other women finding out about the actual Command. Not if she wanted to keep Mikael’s trust. Explaining why a Command like, ‘Never order me again’ was given would have tipped her hand. Until she was sure of their loyalty, she could not tell them of the power they held over him.

“That is all six,” Robin nodded as she stood from her seat. She left her coffee but took the tumbler of alcohol. “That also explains why there is something wrong with you. One seal wasn’t enough. You are still a little mad.”

“What gave it away?” Emma couldn’t help but ask as the pirate walked into the night on the path to the beach. She didn’t need to read her mind to know she was going to the ocean to mourn her friends.

“I’ve known for months. I just didn’t have anything specific to pin you down with until recently.” The pirate looked back and gave the mutant a small, sad smile. “We were all worried for Mikael after he entered the Kiln, but you were the only one who looked ready to die with him.”

“I could have been more worried since I knew more about the situation.”

“True.” The Strawhat turned towards the path once more. “But I had to ask myself; why would Emma Frost care that her jailor was in pain?”

For a moment, Emma was by herself again. She went over the conversation in her mind and decided it would be a boon for her plans in the long run. Only for a moment, however, as another voice stole her from her thoughts once more. Coincidentally it was another woman whose thoughts she couldn’t hear.

“She is right,” Raven said in her monotonous tone. “One seal wasn’t enough. You should ask Mikael to use another.”

“I am happy how I am now. The old Emma is long dead. She is better for it. She wouldn’t be able to handle the loss of control. If he were to use another seal, all it would do would kill me a replace me with a facsimile. That Emma would do all her power to unravel Mikael. And she would succeed.” That old Emma would have told the other women about his condition.

“Unlike you?” Though the mutant couldn’t see the Cambion, staring deep into her glass as she was, Emma still bristled at the tone of her voice. Standing up abruptly, the blonde started to make her way back into the mansion. Not without a parting shot, however. Though different, she was still Emma Frost.

“You don’t get to judge me! Not when you are keeping the same secret. I noticed how you never mentioned Mikael’s emotions during my little ‘interrogation’. Very heroic of you, taking advantage of the man’s disabilities.”

“Him loving us is not a disability.”

“It is when he never got the choice!” Emma snarled as she turned the corner.

Raven’s following words went ignored, even though Emma knew them to be true. After all, she was Chosen.

“I can at least recognize love when I see it… and fanaticism.”

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“Alsanna intends to stay here,” Emma reported. She reviewed her list one more time, ensuring everything and everyone was checked off. They had been teleporting around as Mikael used her for their final rounds. The mutant had also subtly brought up the topic she needed to explain the situation with Death to the Island’s women. He was being very talkative, likely because Emma was the only one who knew his actual state of being. She would repay that trust. She wouldn’t fail Mikael. Not now, not ever.

“She said as much, but I would rather have you check to be sure.” The armoured man sat beside a bonfire, the only heat source in this frozen castle. “Is that the last of them?”

Memories of his time in this game flashed through his mind as he reviewed things.

“For this cycle,” Emma nodded as she adjusted her glasses. Unlike the other women, she had direct insight into Mikael’s tastes. Artoria had gotten a lucky guess in with the bunny costume. The entire outfit had been perfectly set up to appeal to him. But Emma knew persistence would be essential.

Whenever she was summoned, she had subtly different clothes. Nothing overt, a librarian-like look here, an office skirt with garter belt there, but enough to consistently remind the man of her femininity in a way he couldn’t ignore. Taking the role of his ‘secretary’ and aiding him in ensuring the people of this world got what they deserved, for good or ill, had only made her temptations easier. He liked competent and helpful people. Bunny girls were temporary, but sexy teachers/librarians/secretaries were forever.

Like the others, she couldn’t physically interact with the world, but her mental and sensing powers were still applicable. She couldn’t influence anyone, but reading their

minds and reporting to Mikael was well within her abilities. Her range, unaided by Cerebro, was still counted in miles, so she didn't even need to be near them and could stay by Mikael's side.

"You gave Lucatile the Ivory Crown. She intends to return to Mirrah now that she has completed her quest. She will abide by your words and not spread knowledge of it. Benhart has the Sunken Crown. He's not friendly enough to reveal it. Rosabeth has the Iron Crown and is happy to keep it a secret. Shanalotte has the King's Crown and will give it to who she wants. Right now, she has no candidates." Emma flipped the page on her pad, looking over her notes.

"I could probably give it to someone else but fuck 'em," Mikeal said casually. "Dark souls 2 had only a few supporting casts that I like."

"You reunited Lenigrast and Chloanne," Emma continued. "Shalquoir is all set. She has survived this long and won't face any issues. You freed the Milfanitos and brought them to Majula. Gavlan is wheeling and dealing. Tark has been accepted by the community as well. Vengarl is acting as the town defence with his new body. And you settled things between Creighton and Pate."

"What of Milibeth?"

"She intends to stay with the hags."

"Then we are all set on this end," Mikael said as he idly played with a flame in his palm. "How are things on the Island? How is Priscilla?"

"She is fitting in," Emma began. "Your idea of joint training has done wonders to get her out of her room. Supposedly, one of the only reasons she stayed there was due to not liking having to shrink. Glynda has not only helped train her physically but has also started tutoring her."

"And the bite?" Mikeal looked worried, but she was quick to soothe it.

"No reaction. The mark is still there, but it hasn't affected her mind. My warnings early on did not lower her crush on you, but it seems to have diminished on its own. We cannot test the other aspects without you meeting her."

"That's good," he let out a sigh of relief. "I was worried I was Controlling her. I know I chose No Bindings, but better safe than sorry. My future will improve if I do not worry about biting people."

"And on your end?" Emma couldn't help but ask, though she knew he wouldn't want to talk about it. Mikael surprised her by shaking his head and speaking.

"Nothing so far. I always liked Priscilla in the games, and the little time we spent together was nice, but that is it. I'm fond of her, but it is not overpowering like my emotions for you all. As you mentioned, we can't know for sure until I see her in person,

but I am hopeful my condition is limited to you ten. How about the others? Anything I should know about?"

"I still cannot read Raven, Diana, Scathach or Robin's minds," she reminded.

"That's fine. I just want to be sure everyone is OK."

'Worry, concern, protectiveness, love. Smiling faces, Glynda crying, Medea professing her love.'

Most people did not think in complete sentences at all times. If they were focusing on something, sure. But most of the time, thoughts came from feelings and abstract images that flittered around quickly. It was the mark of an excellent psychic how quickly and accurately they could parse through those confusing thoughts. Emma was one of the best psychics in her world.

"Robin just received some bad news," Emma was careful how she couched the report. It wouldn't do to arouse Mikael's suspicion. More than that, so long as the concern he showed was natural, the rage and madness wouldn't come. Over the last few months, Emma had become adept at directing his attention away from his foreign feelings. Imprisonment in a game world was frustrating. Imprisonment in his own mind, with his emotions as shackles? That was what truly drove him mad. "Turns out she hadn't realized the other Strawhat pirates had died before her. It was only after she asked me to help relive the last memories before summoning that we put the pieces together."

"Shit!" Mikael swore. He stood up and started to pace around the room, thoughts going miles a minute. Emma loved watching his thought process, at once precise and fast as it was jumbled. He wasn't Reed Richards or Tony Stark genius, but he was more intelligent than most of her students any day of the week. Teach him one thing, and he would grasp five even if he didn't learn ten more things.

This time his focus was on what this information meant regarding their summoning. He went through the catalogue in his mind. For a moment, Emma tensed as his thoughts lingered on the Patron setting, but he dismissed due to Scathach once more. Instead, his thoughts turned towards the 'used' section. He contemplated that the reason the build had so much extra stuff was due to getting the 'Waifu's' at a discount. Emma breathed a sigh of relief as Mikael decided to pursue that line of inquiry for now.

"Alright," he eventually said. "I want you to offer them your services as a psychologist. Don't force them. This is for their benefit in the long run, but couch it as an extension of Tsunade's check-ups. God knows many problems could be solved if characters just talked about their issues rather than repressing them. Get them to talk about what happened before their summoning if you can. Were they approached by anyone? Did they sign something? It would be best if they let you see their memories like Robin. Anything at

all can be a hint we can potentially use."

"What about Robin?" Emma asked as she noted down his orders. She expected the other women would go for it if she explained it as becoming better friends and wanting to help out. It wouldn't even be a lie. They were all Chosen and would be spending an eternity together. Helping them with issues now would go a long way to making the unit more secure for the future.

"In your professional opinion," Mikael asked while he continued to pace. "Would it be better to delay facing Nishandra and Aldia? They are all that's left between me and the throne. I should be able to beat them before the next summoning, but if you think Robin needs my support, I will put it off. I do not know how long it will be before DS3 or if my plan will delay or hasten the time."

"Assuming it will be a week without contact, like last time?" She dreaded being out of contact for so long. The two and a half days between her summons were too much already. Still, it was a necessary sacrifice for the time when she could spend every moment by his side.

Emma gave the issue some real thought. There were upsides to both options. On the one hand, getting Robin to depend more on Mikael would be nice. On the other, having more time to ensure none of the women bring up 'Death' would be beneficial.

At the end of the day, like Mikael, she did want what was best for the other women. It was a shame that only a few of them had realized that Mikael was what was best. But they would learn like the others. Emma longed for the day she could drop the facade of the 'Ice Queen'. When Mikael no longer needed her as a spy and only wanted her as a woman. There would be a window between Mikael freeing them and finding worlds she was planning to exploit to break down his last resistance. Her plan so far, fostering romance between the women and loyalty to Mikeal, was going well, though a few still needed work. Until then, however, she would do as commanded.

"I think," she hesitated for a bit before firming up her decision. The mutant was very careful not to phrase it like an order, lest the seal try and restrain her. "I think it would be better to proceed with your plan. It should be easy at breakfast tomorrow to make the offer of counselling and word it so that Yoruichi and Tsunade know about Robin. They will be there for her while you do what you need to. How likely is it that you will be in a condition to receive her on the other end?"

"I give it fair odds," Mikael stopped pacing to stare at her. "You know as well as I that my condition drives me to take action, any action if it frees me and you all. I do not plan to link the fire again, but if I am not brought to Lothric after a while, I might go crazy enough to be pushed to link it anyway. I hope to find a worthy replacement before that,

however. Worse comes to worst, I am not only used to the pain, but the fire has already faded to a considerable degree. It won't burn as intensely, nor as long, as it did after Gwyn."

"I wish you didn't have to risk it," the mutant admitted, letting her real feelings flow through for a bit. "Any chance you can still summon us after you walk away from the throne room?"

"I hope not, though it is possible. If I am not brought to Dark Souls 3 immediately, I will be waiting years. That would leave you all trapped for much longer than necessary. I managed to beat this game in two months on your end. I aim to get it even lower than that for the third instalment."

"I'm worried about your sense of time," Emma said. "I can see how you see it. Days and weeks pass by, and you hardly notice. You just fight and die, fight and die, over and over. It's all blurred together. Not counting those first few days or the time spent in the kiln, it's been over four hundred and fifty summonings. You've been at this for almost forty years."

"Shit, now that you put it that way. Did my virginity grow back? Can it do that?" He smiled playfully at her, but she didn't laugh. She didn't particularly like dark humour, but she could tolerate his jokes. So long as they weren't aimed at himself. "You don't have to worry, though. You've seen my mind. Yes, time here is blurring together. Nothing I can do about that. But my memories of home and freedom are crystal clear and never fade. I remember what I ate for dinner the day before I appeared in the cell. I can still feel the warmth of my cat. I still see the laughter of my friends as we went out drinking. I still feel the excitement and anticipation of playing Elden Ring when it comes out. These memories will never fade nor dull."

"You say that like it isn't part of the problem," Emma responded quietly. "A mind is not supposed to be so inflexible. It is meant to forget and move on. I would rather your memories blur rather than this perpetual longing."

"In this life, there are things we can't control and things we can." Mikael shrugged philosophically. "I can only control myself. I have the option to laugh at my situation or cry. I dislike crying. I'm bad at it. So I chose to stop and enjoy the good things I have. Does my situation suck? Big donkey balls. Are there upsides? Definitely. Even if I cannot return any of their feelings, it is nice to be desired by some of my favourite characters. By the time I am free, I will be a certified badass no matter where I go. Who else can claim to not only kill gods but have single-handedly saved and ended a world?"

"I can think of a half dozen people off the top of my head," Emma deadpanned.

"Oi! Don't compare me to comic book characters!" He playfully responded. "You all

are nuts. I, on the other hand, am a picture of sanity."

"Clearly," Emma deadpanned again, though a smile curled her lip. "If nothing else, your skill at arms and sorcery would make you a viable threat."

"And?" Mikael asked pleadingly, wiggling his eyebrows for emphasis.

"And what?" Emma could see what he wanted in his mind, but she acted obliviously. He would have to order her to say it.

"Come on, say it. You know it's true." He urged.

"Fine," the mutant sighed dramatically. "And you are 'Da Dragon'."

"Don't you forget it!" Emma really wanted to smack that adorably smug look off his face. He turned to unlatch the box on his belt and present it to her. She opened up the portal without him having to ask. He threw the box through the gray energy. "Now, this dragon has given you his hoard. I expect you to treat it with all due reverence."

"Anything in specific?" She asked, pulling up her notepad to jot down any orders.

"Same as last time," Mikael shrugged. "Keep the souls contained. I had a few turned into weapons from two different smiths for Medea to look over and possibly replicate their craft. You all can go through the rest and pick out anything you like."

"Alright," Emma finished writing, put her pad away and turned to step through the portal. She did say goodbye, however. "Good luck. I'll see you on the other end."

"Bitch please," Mikael responded as he put his helmet back on. "This dragon doesn't need luck. I am inevitable."

Author's Note:

Alright, a show of hands; Who saw Emma as a traitor and a spy?

She always struck me as the type who is a hero or a villain depending on her circumstances and I wanted that duality to reflect in this story. Even if she isn't completely right in the head.

A lot in this chapter. So much so that, I can't cover everything here. So I won't. I might do another question corner later. Instead, I will go over a few other things.

Q: I think it's part of his messed up catalogue and role reversal. He got the lures. They got the boons. But while he refused to use any explicit mind control on them, the catalogue could have enforced the instant love on him. He, a dragon of freedom and someone who has strong views on mind control, is being forced to love. He's probably worried he'll eventually go insane and hurt them because his very essence is rebelling and driving him to frothing rage.

A: You weren't completely right but you were the closest so I'll give you the win for this little contest. You can post or PM me who you want now, or you can wait till after the prologue. That is the earliest any smut will happen.

For those curious, the chapter I was referencing when I hinted about Mikael's 'disability' was the Raven chapter part b that came out on 6/20. I explicitly stated that he felt overpowering love for them, even as he denied being able to 'fall in love' with the other. Raven knew about his emotions, being an empath, though the conclusions she came to were wrong. That will be explored in future chapters.

The dominoes are all in place. Now I just need to push them over.

INTERLUDE:
LIVE HOW WE CAN

But all the while I sit and think
of times there were before,
I listen for returning feet
and voices at the door.

"Here is your Common Ground. Is there anything else I can get for you, ma'am?" The server asked. While the service was friendly and the food was good, she had only come to this Deli because she felt sentimental.

She had been one of the first patrons of this establishment when it opened. She used to only check on Mikael's progress every decade, but since its opening, she came around yearly.

"No, thank you," she said with a soft smile. The man blushed a bit but left quickly. He was a good kid, she knew. It was a shame that there were only two decades more before he would die in a mugging in Gotham. Still, everyone gets a lifetime. No more. No less.

Besides, he had it better than the poor chef. Next tuesday, she will be in a hostage situation. Most would survive, but she would take a bullet as an example before Dragon would deal with the situation.

As relaxed as she was, Death was still at work. She was there when every life was born. She was there when they took their last breath.

The Thanagarians clashed with the Shi'ar, and billions of souls were instantly lost. Galactus had just consumed a world, and the Pheonix Force was on its way to another. Apokolips stood on the precipice of another invasion.

On this planet alone, millions die every second. There would be a spike in a week as Behemoth ransacked Stockholm. It would be pushed off quickly by the combined forces of the Justice League, Avengers, and other heroes, but not before ending the lives of 12,484 intelligent beings.

And this was but one reality of countless others Death oversaw.

She knew that somewhere out there, there were multiverses where she was but one of the Endless.

Here, she was alone.

Sipping her drink, Death looked out over the Rocky Mountains. The torrential rain did not impede her view of the natural wonders. She had been there when they were first formed, carved from the glacial movements of ice over millions of years. She would be

here when they were ground to foothills by the passages of the wind.

The Beginning was beautiful, a spark of possibilities.

The Middle was chaotic, those possibilities slamming into each other to tell a unique story.

The End was Her.

Right now, however, Death sipped her drink as she stared past the pouring rain, the massive mountains, and the sky. She looked beyond the Solar System, the Milkyway, and beyond time and space. She stared at a titanic white dragon clutching a jewel to its chest as it slumbered.

The island contained within the jewel was still growing and evolving, as were the women inside. Even as the Dragon slept, it protected the jewel. The ravages of the years barely lingered on the island for a moment before power swept them away. The Company's Deal tried to take its toll, but the Dragon bore the brunt.

Death smiled. Even subconsciously, Mikael protected what was His. She had chosen well. He wasn't afraid of the consequences of his actions.

Death looked sideways to the past and future, looking beyond the Dragon and the jewel. Linear time was nothing to one such as her. Had it been anyone else but her champion, Death would have only needed to check on him once to know all possible outcomes. As a dragon of Freedom, he wasn't bound to Fate and Death was constantly worried he would deviate early in his life. It would jeopardize everything she hoped for him.

For now, things were still on track.

Mikael stood triumphant over the bodies of Aldia and Nashandra. He hadn't fallen to either of them a single time in their fights. He watched as golems opened the path to the Throne.

He turned to walk away.

Death sighed. Mikael, for all his cleverness and guile, was missing critical information. She would be able to clear it up once he was free, but until then, he was operating on erroneous assumptions. Some of his guesses were correct, but many were not.

He did not know of the Deal. He did not know of Her. He assumed his shackles were of the Mind, Heart, and World.

They were not.

His restraints were of Will, Power, and Time. He believed that the women were not Bound to him, but he was Bound to them. He went to great lengths to make sure they never found out. It only fueled Mikael's desperation to get rid of them before they started ordering him and changing him further.

He was right, but only so long as he was trapped. He did not understand that they only controlled his Avatar. One of the critical points Death had argued for.

The Company rep had caved once it was pointed out that a dragon of Freedom was useless if it was constantly chained by its companion. His body was Free.

Death had negotiated fiercely to stack the odds in his favour. Had he all the information, Mikael would have broken free in his first World. But the free flow of information was one of the things she had to give up to purchase his service at a reasonable price. So long as his punishment was ongoing, at least.

The Company took a dim view of those who tried to cheat them.

As it was, rather than reaching Freedom after one World, it would take five for him to piece things together. Better than the alternative, the Company rep had wanted to order the worlds so that he would have been trapped for a few dozen. That had been one of the points Death had won, though it cost her.

As Mikeal walked away from the Throne of Want, Death surreptitiously took the souls of his foes. He would want them later, once his witch learned to craft souls into arms.

Death waived down a waiter for a refill as she watched Mikeal leave Drangleic entirely. He was partially in search of a replacement, partially sightseeing. As an undead, Mikael felt no joy in taste, smell, or touch. He hungered but could not eat. He lusted but could not feel pleasure. But his intellectual curiosity pushed him onward. He travelled to faraway lands, hiding his curse. He attended schools, talked to theologians, and sought out famous champions.

The fire continued to fade, as it ever would. It wouldn't go out until the end of the World. Such was the nature of Gwyn's machinations.

The undead curse spread far and wide. Great warriors flocked to Drangleic, seeking to kindle it. They found a town of misfits, well guarded, to serve as a hub. More than a few would find their way to the Throne and serve themselves up to the fire.

It wouldn't be enough.

Their souls burned too quickly, unable to last for more than a year. They were not champions who had overcome gods and demons. They were men, strong men, but men nonetheless. Their souls were mortal. Fleeting.

Over time, a strong fire served to draw the powerful to it. They would, in turn, grow stronger with its presence. They would then serve as food for whichever undead was strong enough to fell them. This was not the first time an undead decided to not link the fire. This was, however, the first time an undead who could not hollow did.

Mikael travelled far and wide, searching for knowledge and someone who could serve as kindling to the flame. He was unaware that, so long as no one claimed his soul,

resplendent as it was, no one would be strong enough to feed the First Flame. He held the Lords in his chest.

It took four centuries for Lucatiel to track him down.

The knight of Mirrah begged him to right his wrong. She assumed that he kept a crown of his own, and it was responsible for his unhollowed nature. So long as he did not hollow, his soul would remain anchored to his will even if he died. Without that power, nobody else could kindle the flame.

The knight would have offered herself up to the flame, but for all her skill, her soul was weak.

By this point, the undead outnumbered the living. Another few centuries and Life would die out completely. Hollows, for all their eternal life, could not breed. In an Age of Dark, it wouldn't be a problem. In the Age of Fire? It would be the end.

Death knew Mikael could not stand for that.

He had his issues. He was selfish, manipulative, and secretive, but Mikael was still a good person. She wouldn't have chosen him otherwise.

The Dragon of Life made it back to Majula within the year.

Shannalotte waited for him there, a Crown in her hands. The only one fit for a True Monarch.

Mikeal took it with a wry smile.

As he took his seat on the Throne of Want, closing the doors behind him, Death turned her attention away from the past.

While the flames were less intense and would burn shorter than before, she did not want to see his suffering. Five Worlds were the lowest she could give him. With these first two down, his debt was clear. He could now be compensated for his suffering. Death knew this should be the last time he Burned. It did not make watching it easy.

Turning towards the future was a happier prospect.

There was no Destiny in this World, and free will still existed, but Death was strong enough that she could look through the currents of fate and see likely outcomes.

Death looked beyond the Dragon once more. She saw it achieve its Freedom, and there the paths diverged.

In one path, it made its way to various worlds. It dropped off its companions as it had promised. They would never relent in hunting him. He would spend centuries fleeing, pursued by those who loved him. It would take him that long to realize the error of his assumptions. He would then spend eons at their side, making up for it. That path reached a happy if incomplete, end.

In another, Death summoned him.

He would hunt her down and hold her responsible for all the suffering he and his women had faced. The World would rise up against him in his crusade, and he would lay it low. Heroes and champions would fall to either him or his hoard. Once she explained her side, his relationship with his women would progress quickly, for good and ill, but Mikael would forever resent Death.

Countless other possibilities spiralled out in front of her. She ignored any she wasn't present in. Those were of no use. She focused on those who saw her meeting Mikael as quickly as possible in favourable settings. From there, they could be friends or rivals. Lovers or companions. Eventually, Death settled on the same course of action as always. The one that most likely led to Mikael walking through the door of this Deli a year from now to meet her.

Death stood from her seat, leaving money on the table for her drinks. A pleasant walk in the rain would be good right about now. She was feeling nostalgic. A plan, millions of years in the making, would be coming to fruition soon.

Author's Note:

Here it is, the final chapter of part 2. I kept this interlude short on purpose, I do not want to give away too much. As it is, you all can see the 'World' in which the main story will take place. The easiest way to describe it would be 'Superheroes? Yes'. The exact mechanics will be revealed later.

We also see the 'interim' period between games. My reading of dark soul endings has always been that no matter what you choose, the fire never completely goes out until the last game. The player character, if they choose the 'dark' ending eventually goes hollow and is slain by another undead. This repeats until someone links the fire. If the flame gets weak enough, backups are in place (the bell to awaken the lords of cinder, unkindled ash being summoned, etc..) to ensure it never goes completely out. Hollows cannot take over until DS3 because, before then, they are not intelligent, just mindless undead so the Age of Dark cannot begin until they are ready to usurp it.

I think that's all for today. I might do a Question Corner this weekend, to answer a few that pop up but the next half chapter won't be out until Monday. This writing binge was a fun challenge but I do not want to burn out my enjoyment so a little break for now.

I'll be honest guys, I find myself conflicted.

I started R&R for three reasons:

-I wanted to tell a good story, using WC as a framework

-I wanted to get better at characterization

-A way to unwind

On one hand, I have gotten a lot of responses from my work, which is always nice, and you all seem to really like how I've portrayed the women of the Island. Since one of the reasons I started this fic was to get better at characterization, I guess I can call it a success.

At the same time, it is a failure.

As the author, I know what the characters are doing and going through. Part of characterization is portraying non-perspective characters in a way that gets their own distinct personalities across. I cannot help but feel that Mikael's own situation hasn't come across well. That is partially my fault, due to how I decided to structure this part of the story in my attempt to write the perspective of the women.

The crux of the matter is a lot of the feedback I've been getting has not been constructive. Do not get me wrong, much of the criticism has helped me and I want the feedback to continue, but at the same time, people do not seem to be enjoying the story itself. I find myself losing the motivation to write if no one enjoys my work, as a full third of the reason I started this work was to help relax.

Here's what I am going to do. I am not going to stop writing, I've at least committed myself to finishing Volume 1 (the 'Prologue') so no matter what I will keep at it till that part is done. I will be keeping Part 3 (the shortest part) mostly the same but the later sections (4 and 5) will be different than what I originally had planned. As I said, I am trying to improve and much of the criticism has been valid so I will take that into account. I will be also moving back to a Monda and Friday schedule, this last rush of chapters wasn't something that worked well. I will also be posting chapters in full, no longer in parts.

We read and write fanfiction to enjoy the stories, my hope is that RR can be something that both its readers and I, as the author, can enjoy.

PS: The complete song for Part 2 is from Fellowship of the Ring, Bilbo sings it to Frodo:

I sit beside the fire and think
of all that I have seen,
of meadow-flowers and butterflies
in summers that have been;
Of yellow leaves and gossamer
in autumns that there were,
with morning mist and silver sun
and wind upon my hair.
I sit beside the fire and think
of how the world will be
when winter comes without a spring
that I shall never see.
For still there are so many things
that I have never seen:

in every wood in every spring
there is a different green.
I sit beside the fire and think
of people long ago,
and people who will see a world
that I shall never know.
But all the while I sit and think
of times there were before,
I listen for returning feet
and voices at the door.

Solitude

SOLITUDE I

Here, O my heart, let us burn the dear dreams that are dead,
Here in this wood let us fashion a funeral pyre
Of fallen white petals and leaves that are mellow and red,
Here let us burn them in noon's flaming torches of fire.

Robin awoke in a tangle of limbs.

That was, surprisingly, a rare occurrence. Her Devil Fruit abilities only existed when she concentrated on them, so any time she fell asleep or unconscious, the limbs would fade.

Last night she had been so drunk she couldn't have used her fruit anyway.

It was already later than she usually rose, the clock on the wall pointing to well past 11. Her companions, Yoruichi and Tsunade, were still insensate. Hence, it was a bit of a challenge to disentangle herself from their grips. Though Robin did take a moment to admire their naked forms while she dressed for the day. Yoruichi had curled up facing Tsunade, suckling at her teet.

Despite a few bawdy jokes or wandering hands, nothing sexual had occurred last night. Nobody had been in the mood after Robin had broken the news about their home worlds. While the pirate couldn't speak of any of the other women, the three of them had been too caught up in reminiscence to be in any mood for sex.

Judging by the sounds from the other hall, Scathach had comforted Glynda in a much more physical manner. However, Robin was sure the revelation about the world's end hadn't surprised the huntress.

There had been laughter and tears. They had traded stories of all the good times, the people they would miss, the love they had lost, and dreams they never achieved. The night had lasted well into the early hours before everybody stumbled to bed.

As Robin stepped from the room quietly, she took stock of her emotions.

She felt lighter, less overcome when she thought of the Strawhats. There was still a sadness there, grief that would never really go away, but it was a lighter thing. Unlike in the past, when she had fled Ohara, she was not alone with her grief. She had friends and a family who mourned with her.

"Dereshishishishi," Robin chuckled to herself as she made her way to the kitchen. She was unsurprised to find Medea there, puttering around to preparing a meal. "Good morning," she greeted the witch.

"Morning, Robin," Medea answered as she continued to stir the bowl. Her actions

were automatic, so the greek was able to give the pirate a commiserating look. “How are you holding up?”

“I’ll be alright,” she answered demurely as she took a cup of coffee. While the brunette didn’t have a hangover, she still preferred to start her day with a cup or two of the black gold. “It still hurts, but I think things will turn out fine.”

“It gets easier,” Medea finished mixing and put her hand on Robins in a show of camaraderie. The elfin woman stared at her in sincere concern. “It will hurt. You will always think of them, but eventually, it achs more than bleeds.”

“Were the argonauts close?” Robin couldn’t help but ask. The greek rarely talked about her time on the famous ship.

“The argonauts?” Medea asked, confused as she returned to cooking. “Some were, and with a few exceptions, we were all friendly to each other. I was more talking about my family. I lost them twice over. It does get easier. We just have to move on little by little.”

“I didn’t mean to assume,” Robin apologized as she passed a plate of french toast covered in fruit and syrup. From above, they heard another pair of feet descending the stairs. “I suppose I was a bit spoiled with my crew. We were all close. I thought the Argo would be similar.”

“You forget that we were less like a crew and more like a random collection of people on various quests. More than that, we all had dealings with the gods. Only a rare few were of good nature. Events like that tend to scar.” Medea explained as she set six more plates at the pirate’s side.

Judging by the serving size alone, Robin already knew who was joining them.

“Good morning Robin, Medea,” Artoria nodded properly at each of them in turn as she took her seat at the kitchen counter. She ate with the speed of Luffy but the elegance of Sanji. Her mouth was never full when she talked, but she always took another bite as soon as the last word left. “I trust you both are well-rested?”

“Oh, I slept fine,” Medea said with a sly smile. “I was a bit lonely. I think only four of us went to bed alone.” Artoria blushed deeply, looking away. She continued to eat, however.

“Diana was distraught about her world,” the King of Knights defended herself. “We were both well into our cups, and she proved to be a very compassionate lover despite my inexperience. While I do not regret the experience, I do wish you would not bring up such a topic at the table.”

“I’m just teasing,” the greek said with a chuckle. “I am happy for you two, though I would recommend making sure your door is closed completely in the future if you want privacy.”

“We will do that,” the blonde said, her flush redoubled.

Robin watched the interaction as she continued to eat. While not unfamiliar with sex, having seen more than her fair share, the pirate had always been too preoccupied to deal in romance. Before she joined the crew, there had been no one she had trusted enough to lay with. She knew how to lead people on, to tease and tantalize, but the physical aspect was foreign to her. Of the Strawhats, only Sanji and Franky were interested in sex and romance. The rest of the crew had been ‘Dream-sexual’, too focused on their goals to think about anything else.

The brunette wasn’t even sure what she liked. Male? Female? Young? Mature? Now that her dream was put on hold, at least for the moment, maybe she should consider romance since she had the time. Despite never giving love much thought, Robin knew exactly who was sleeping with who on the Island.

Early on, she had kept tabs on everybody at all times. It had been paranoia, she wouldn’t deny, but Robin had held at the practice even after she was sure none of the other women were a threat. Partly out of habit, partly curiosity.

Most would not know that Robin, the devil child and most dangerous woman in the world, was that she was a huge gossip. Most of the time, she kept what she discovered to herself. On the crew, she only talked with Nami about what she saw or heard with her Devil Fruit. By this point, the pirate had dirt on all the women on the Island.

Robin watched Medea tease her crush/co-conspirator. She noted the little touches, the way she swayed her hips or bent at the waist. For all that Artoria was eager to put the greek’s advice to use in seducing Mikael, the blonde was woefully naive when it came to those same tactics being used on her.

Robin smiled to herself behind her cup of coffee. While they weren’t the Strawhats, they were still her new family.

The rest of the women trickled in over the next half hour to have a late breakfast. By the time everyone was fed and had consumed the pills Medea had made for them, Emma turned to address the room.

“As you all might have guessed, Mikael has defeated the last boss of the second game.” A few worried looks were thrown at the blonde, but she waved off their concern. “He doesn’t intend to link the fire. He will be walking away and trying to find someone else to do it. Unfortunately, he has no idea how long that will take, so we could be without contact for a week or more, like last time. Or he could summon us tonight. He already missed today’s 9am summons. Robin, when you are called, let us know as soon as possible.”

“Sure,” Robin agreed readily enough, leaning into her had as she watched the

proceedings.

“Thank you. After last night, I would like to offer my service as a psychologist and counsellor, should anyone feel the need. Like Tsunade, my door is always open if you want to talk.” Robin squinted her eyes at Emma. She was being a bit too helpful. The pirate wasn’t the only one to think so because Yoruichi spoke up.

“And how are we supposed to trust you? You kept our world’s situation a secret until Robin confronted you.”

“You can trust me to have some professional pride if nothing else,” the mutant said. The rest of the room did not look entirely convinced, so she explained. “None of us trusted each other in the early days, and as a psychic, I know more than most how important privacy is. I only made the deduction about Death after the first month. By that point, even if I told you all, you wouldn’t believe me, nor would it have achieved anything. It would also be more points of failure for Mikael to discover.”

“Why hide it from him?” Glynda asked.

“His second element,” Diana said before Emma could respond. “While he is a dragon of Freedom, he is also a dragon of Life.”

“That is one concern,” the White Queen nodded at the amazon. “We know elements have a mental and emotional aspect, so Life being in the service of Death could be a problem. It is not my main worry, though. How much do you all know about Patrons?”

“Not a great deal,” Glynda admitted. “I believe he mentioned it to me only once, saying there would have been no point in the original story.”

“There are two main worries I have,” Emma said as she poured herself another cup of coffee. Her fifth in half an hour. Robin shared a concerned look with Raven. Was Emma already spiralling? It hadn’t even been a full day since she had talked to Mikael.

“The first and least of my worries is that Patrons choose their champions. Unlike the company which lets people do as they will, getting clones of any captures for use, Patrons actively pick people for reasons. This gives them benefits but also duties. Not only did Death choose Mikael, but they also tampered with things to a great extent.”

“Such as?” Tsunade asked.

“Such as the sheer size of that dragon outside,” Medea chimed in. Emma nodded for her to continue. “I went over dragons with Mikeal a few times. It makes no sense for the dragon to be that big. This Island can be large because there are ways to purchase size expansions. The only way for Mikael’s body to grow so big would be it growing throughout millions of years.”

“They also made sure he was as skilled as possible,” Glynda said in thought. The rest of the room looked at her, and she elaborated. “I helped train him. He was hopeless early

on, with no combat sense in the least. Even if he could control the dragon's body, his only threat would be in size. Now? In pure skill alone, he is my superior. Even if he does not have Aura, so long as he is decently equipped and can use his magic, only a few of us could beat him. Most of that is pure skill and knowledge."

"This man has been honing his warcraft for decades," Diana nodded, catching on. "He has fought armies, monsters and gods. He isn't even done yet. By forcing us to remain on the sidelines, they have created a warrior of unsurpassed skill."

"That is not the only change Death made," Scathach said. "The Island grows and adapts as he encounters foes. The manor would have existed in Mikael's original choices but not the Island. We must assume that it serves some greater purpose as well."

"So Death wants something from him, or us? Big whoop," Yoruichi said, still staring at Emma. "We can deal with that when it becomes important. You never told us why we couldn't just tell Mikael."

"As I said, Death's intentions were the least of my worries." Emma took a big sip of coffee, pausing in thought before speaking again with a sigh. "I will just come out and say it then. We are all dead." There was a beat of silence where the women waited for Emma to elaborate.

"So?" Yoruichi asked.

"We are all dead," Emma repeated. "Not undead like Mikael or souls like in your home world. The only reason we are still around is that we were Chosen. Our worlds ended, and they took us with them."

"We are aware of that," Tsunade said harshly, not liking having the recent wound opened.

"I think," Robin said, putting the pieces together. "What she means is our continued existence is dependent on Mikael."

"Is that not a good thing?" Priscilla, who had been silent until now, spoke. "Did our Bard not make you all immortal?"

"We do not know if Warranty Plan is active. A lot of the original catalogue was changed. We have to operate on the assumption that we are no longer guaranteed rebirth," Glynda explained to the crossbreed before turning to Emma. "I do not think that is what you are getting at."

"It isn't, but keeping our potential mortality in mind is essential. I mentioned that by being chosen by a Patron, people get perks and benefits that they do not usually receive by being randomly picked by the company. Death, specifically, allows for the release of any captures and its champions to send the dead off to an afterlife."

"You think he would put us to rest if he knew he could?" Yoruichi asked, horrified.

Others around the table reacted just as harshly. Medea looked like she would cry at the thought.

“For some of us? Before he left his cell if he knew he could and convinced himself it was for our sake? He would have in a heartbeat. Now, I can’t be sure one way or the other, but I would rather not take the risk.” Emma said plainly, staring at Scathach. Rather than be affronted at the words, Robin paid attention to the mutant’s emphasis on the word ‘convinced’. She had done something similar the night before.

“Why? I know he said he couldn’t love us, but surely he doesn’t hate us to that extent?” Medea looked almost desperately at Emma, urging her for answers.

“He doesn’t hate us,” she quickly clarified. “In fact, the opposi-”

The mutant was cut off as her throat seized up. The psychic clutched at it desperately, coffee falling to the floor. All the women sprang to their feet, some rushing to her side in an instant. Others looked around in search of an enemy.

Robin stayed in her seat, well aware that it was the result of the Command Seal. She was busy pondering the blonde’s words. The opposite of hate? That had some implications that would line up with her own theories.

“I’m fine,” Emma said as the women crowded around her. “I’m fine. It was the seal. I can’t say more. Just know Mikael doesn’t hate any of us.”

“It’ll be another month or so before we cross the tier seven threshold for dragon’s blood,” Medea said as she cleaned up the spilled mess. “Once we do, I am going to use Rule Breaker. Whether you want me to or not.”

“Please do,” Emma said. “I am rather sick of things as it is.”

Robin took the chance to step away. She would get no more answers for now. A lot had changed in the last twenty-four hours. She needed to get the story straight before the details faded.

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Robin, upon her summoning, found herself in a cemetery.

Dozens of headstones lined the walls and pilled at her feet. The sky was a grey overcast, barely providing any illumination. Ash swirled in the cold air, and groans rang in the distance. Robin could not see her summoner immediately, but he was not hard to find.

He lay in an open coffin, half-buried in the dirt. His form was emaciated and sunken in, though not to the extent he was in his cell. Rather than look like dried jerky, he looked like Luffy, who went without eating for two days.

He was, again, completely naked.

Robin eyed his form more critically since he wasn't a complete husk of rotten skin and bones. She had seen dozens of examples in her life of spying. Still, her only real experience with touching male genitalia had been when the crew rather forcefully recruited Franky; other times, she used it as a convenient target. Mikael staked up favourably to the cyborg, but the pirate had no idea what was considered 'impressive' in this sphere.

Mikael was awake, his eyes wide and unfocused as he stared at the sky. He did not so much as twitch as she neared his still form. Robin would have been worried had the Darksign branded onto his heart and the six red Command Seals that circled it not pulsed regularly like a heartbeat.

"Mikael?" Robin asked softly as she leaned her head over his prone form. "What happened? Did something go wrong with your plan?" The man stared at her for a moment, uncomprehending, before he moved.

"Nothing." He said, taking a deep breath and dislodging the pile of ash that had accumulated on his body. "Nothing happened."

Robin backed away as the man slowly and methodically sat up and raised himself out of the coffin. Suddenly his body twitched violently in spasms, and he almost fell back down. Robin reached out instinctually to support him, though her body passed through as always. She needn't have bothered as Mikael caught himself and, with another deep breath, rose to his full height.

"Sorry," Mikael said as he started to slowly and carefully go through some stretches. "I am just getting used to this new body." His voice was rougher than she was used to. He usually spoke with a deep, smooth rhythm that Yoruichi had, more than once, claimed to want to hear in bed. Now it was the sound of gravel and rocks.

Robin eyed the man critically as he methodically moved every part of his body, uncaring for his nudity. The man, even emaciated as he was, was still a mountain. Robin was the second tallest of the women on the Island at 6'2", after only Glynda's impressive 6'5", and Mikael still stood an inch or two taller than her. Though he lacked the muscles she knew he would gain, he was still wider than her. Every once in a while, his body would be wracked with more spasms, and he would lose his footing.

"What happened after you defeated Aldia?" Robin asked. As the minutes passed, he got more control of his body, and his speed picked up. His face still remained blank of all expression.

"I hoped I would be transported here right away," he explained monotonously. "I wasn't. It took a while. How long was it on your end?"

"Only six days this time," Robin said, starting to grow worried about his out-of-character behaviour. Mikael loved to talk. He was never the strong silent type. After

discussing with the other women, they all agreed that he wasn't talking only when he was singing or deep in thought.

"That lines up with my time," Mikeal said simply. Robin did some quick math. Six days was almost two whole cycles. He must have been on his own for nearly two years. No wonder he was out of it. Mikael continued to move, starting to do squats and focus on his legs. There was a moment of silence that Robin didn't know how to break before the man began to speak, his words hesitant and unsure. "Are you… are you all right?"

"Hm?"

"Before," the naked man stopped his movements and looked at her. His face finally changed to worry and confusion. "Before Nishandra and Aldia, I was talking to… Emma, I think. She said you got some bad news. Are you all right?"

Robin's heart clenched for more than one reason. The reminder of her loss, of the Strawhats, was still painful. It had only been a week after all. But another feeling also welled up within her.

Nico Robin was familiar with loneliness. It had been her only companion throughout most of her life. With no friends or people to trust, her loneliness nearly drove her to take her own life. It had been a year and a half for him. After what had clearly been an ordeal, Mikael still remembered a conversation that long ago and still worried about her. It touched Robin somewhere deep.

She hoped that he at least had someone with him during that time. That he hadn't been utterly alone like she suspected.

"I'm hanging in there," the pirate said instead of asking about her worries. "The other women have been keeping me company. I am not alone." 'Unlike you', went unsaid.

"Good, good." Mikeal nodded slowly before returning to his stretches. Robin watched him for a minute, wondering if he would continue the conversation. He didn't, though she was surprised he could do a full split.

"Medea succeeded," she said. Mikael looked at her in confusion. "With the eggs? She succeeded in hatching them."

"Really?" A slight glint of curiosity now glimmered in Mikael's brown eyes.

"Yes," she continued, happy to get him out of his stupor. "All four hatched four days ago. They were adorable, barely the size of a pillow. Three females and one male. Artoria named the male Hengeron II and one of the girls Llamrei II. Medea called the other two, Andromeda and Cassandra. They've really livened up the place."

"Of course they would call them that," Mikeal deadpanned, though Robin could see a hint of a smile on the corner of his mouth.

"Both Medea and Tsunade have been trying to get them to sit still for some scans,"

Robin continued. “But all four, barely able to walk, try and follow Artoria or Priscilla like little ducklings.” Mikeal finally let out a small chuckle at the mental image.

“You’re right. That does sound adorable.”

For the next few minutes, Robin regaled him with stories of the drakes’ exploits. Like how they had destroyed Priscilla’s robe and made a nest out of it. Or how they had chased Yoruichi, in cat form, around the living room. Through it all. Mikael continued with his exercises. Though he did laugh at the last story.

“They’re going to be real hellions when they grow up,” he said as he stood up from a brief stint of sit-ups. He started to make his way towards the only exit in the little cul-de-sac the pair found themselves in.

“I’m sure they will kidnap a princess or three,” Robin said as she followed the man. “Maybe terrorize a village.”

“I’m sure you all will train them right. Though, I wouldn’t be surprised if Medea taught them to attack any blond pretty boys on sight.”

As he spoke, they approached a widening in the path. Robin noted with interest the ruins that lay around her. A fountain of some sort had once been here, the damage and growth of flora indicating it had been abandoned centuries ago. Nestled in between the cliffs as it was, engravings had been protected from most of the elements.

The occasional body lay in heaps. More graves lay all around, and what plant life there was, was grey and wilting. Some bodies still twitched, though most lay still.

Mikael would eye a body once before moving on in quick succession. Robin decided to stay quiet for the moment, unsure if this area was safe for her summoner. The first body they approached that still moved, naked like her companion, Mikael walked up to and stomped on the being’s skull. Its head burst, covering the man’s foot in grey matter. A silver mist rose from the corpse and flowed into Mikael, who rolled his shoulders in response.

“Alright, everything is still in order,” he said as he wiped his food in the dirt. “Let’s find one with an Estus, weapon or at least clothes.”

“I’m guessing you know where we are?” Robin asked as the pair made their way forward, occasionally pausing for Mikael to strike down another hollow.

“Dark Souls 3, unlike the other games, has a different framework,” Mikael explained, casually breaking the neck of an undead who had tried to lunge at him. “You do not play as a hollow, at least not initially by the same definition as the other games. This is the Cemetary of Ash. Here lay those who tried to Link the Fire but were too weak to sustain the flame. Only ash remained of them. To make a long story short, the Lords of Cinder who could link the fire haven’t. So the world calls upon Unkindled Ash since the start of

the world to give them another chance to Link the Fire. Just another failsafe in the Age of Fire to ensure the flames never truly go out."

"So they are not undead," Robin couldn't help but ask.

"Not hollows specifically," Mikael clarified. "They are still undead, and most are- 'scuse me for a second."

A dog, grey and emaciated like the corpse it was eating, had spotted her companion. It growled and barked, lunging for Mikael's throat. The man barely flitched at the violent attack. Instead, he caught it by the neck in one hand and broke its neck with a loud and quick 'snap'.

"Sorry," he said, throwing the corpse away. "Anyway, they are a different kind of undead. Most are still mindless, the First Flame having burned away their sanity just like hollowing. It is okay to think of them as the same, though the term Hollow has different connotations in this game than in the others."

"Is that why you can end the Age of Fire in this game?"

"Partially," he waved in a 'so-so' gesture. "You have to understand, Unkindled Ash are failures. The fact that they are summoned at all shows how dire the Flame feels the situation to be. For all Gwyn's machinations, the Age is meant to end, and will end, eventually. If the first game is the last gasp of a civilization, then this one is the last gasp of a World. It has been stretched for too long."

Robin continued to ask questions as they wandered about the cemetery. There was a brief period of worry when Mikael was beset by three foes and a dog at once, but her summoner managed to survive the encounter with some good positioning. Robin would rate his hand-to-hand skills as decent enough, though she could probably take him with her own Fishman Karate. It was clear he was used to weapons for all his combat skills.

Eventually, after an hour of wandering, the pair managed to make their way out of the part of the cemetery in the cliffs' crag. Robin's breath was stolen from her when she stood on the ravine's edge, staring out over the miles and miles of tombstones lined the cliff edge. Very faintly in the distance, near the horizon, she could make out a structure of some sort.

"That's my first stop," Mikeal said. He was also looking at the far structure. "I'll have to face Gundyr if I want to make it to Firelink Shrine. I hope I can find a decent enough weapon before then. The Fire Keeper is on the other side, and I can't channel souls into my body and spirit without her."

"Let me help you look for something," Robin said. While her main body remained nearby, she started sprouting eyes further away. The sheer number of dead that filled this graveyard was staggering. It took some real effort on the woman's part to sort through all

the visual information she was receiving.

Most of the ashen ones were the naked, gaunt-looking ones the pair had already met. After five minutes of searching, Robin found one in better shape. It wore loose clothes, which was more than most, and the pirate directed Mikael in its direction. Unfortunately, it only had the clothes on its back. Nonetheless, her companion killed it and took its vestments.

The next few hours were spent making a winding trail towards the shrine.

By the time Robin felt her time ending, they were still far away, but the pair had managed to find two Estus flasks and a broken sword. More importantly, to Robin at least, Mikael had gotten out of his funk. He was joking and laughing as usual. She had even caught him humming under his breath a few times.

As she stepped through the portal, Robin let her thoughts broadcast. Emma had been nearly catatonic with worry for the last few days, and the pirate would rather nip her attitude in the bud. At the same time, Robin decided it was time she took the mutant up on her offer of counselling.

If Mikael could push forward, so could she.

Author's Note:

Alright guys, here is the start of Part 3. It will be by far the shortest part, only 3 chapters. I am also trying to make my writing style a bit less obtuse, and more clearly state the reasons why people do the things they do. For those eagle-eyed readers, you will also note that I have stopped referring to this as the 'Prologue;' and have changed it to Volume 1. This is a reflection on how I am going to try and integrate it more into the entire narrative. It is still the setup for the rest of the fic, but I would rather people come in with realistic expectations.

This also marks the start of Full chapters in every update. I still will release every Friday and Monday so we will finish part 3 by this time next week. I hope that will help with cohesion.

SOLITUDE II

We are weary, my heart, we are weary, so long we have borne
The heavy loved burden of dreams that are dead, let us rest,
Let us scatter their ashes away, for a while let us mourn;
We will rest, O my heart, till the shadows are gray in the west.

"You are doing very well, you two," Diana said encouragingly. "Robin, you should be all set. You've got floating down, and the rest is just getting comfortable with the various methods of movements."

"Thank you," Robin said, laying on her back. She was the one that took to the lessons the easiest. While all the women possessed 'Body Talent', it didn't change that some people were naturally predisposed to certain activities more than others.

Looking over at Artoria, who continued to flail in the water like she was trying to fight it, Diana couldn't help but smile wryly.

Her friend, and more recently lover, had not told the group she couldn't swim. In fact, the amazon would bet money that the blonde would have kept it a secret for as long as possible had Robin not asked for swimming lessons of her own. On land, Artoria was the picture of elegant and mature grace. In the water, she looked like a kid on too much sugar.

Even as Diana watched, the blonde got fed up with her failure to stay afloat. The blonde let herself sink and jumped off the ocean floor. She landed on the waves themselves, the blessing of the Lady of the Lake keeping her from falling.

"I shall best this trial," Artoria swore, staring down at the water like it was her worst enemy.

"You are trying too hard," Glynda said. The taller blonde was wading in their direction, the shallow water only coming up under her considerable breasts. Everyone was in swimsuits of one form or another, except for Yoruichi, who insisted on remaining nude. "Diana, let me take over for a bit."

"If you feel up for it," the amazon started to make her way back to the shore. Artoria would still need help from the teacher, but Robin was enjoying herself independently. The brunette had conjured several legs and combined them in a pseudo mermaid tale.

"I love that girl," Medea said, eyeing Artoria and shaking her head. The bluenette was sipping some fruity blue drink and lounging on a beach chair. "But she can be a bit of a ditz about the oddest things."

Diana had, by this point, towelled off and taken her own seat on the plush chairs. Medea was to her left, and Emma, tanning on her own chair, was to her right. In the

distance, they watched Yoruichi hoot and holler in joy as she piloted the jet ski around. Tsunade simply floated in the surf on an inflatable raft, more than a few jugs of sake within arms reach.

"It's because she had such an odd upbringing," Emma said, not moving from her position. "She was a woman pretending to be a man, a knight, and a king. Her education came from an apprenticeship and the occasional advice from an Incubus. She has 'Grail Knowledge', but, unlike you or Scathach, she defaults to her time in Camelot."

"Tis a silly place, Camelot," Diana said seriously before grinning at Medea, who grinned back. "By the way, who's watching the children?"

"Priscilla is babysitting," Medea said, taking another sip of her drink. "She's been training so much that she's fallen behind in the games she wanted to play. She set up in the living room with the big TV, and I dumped the little guys with her. They are still too young for me to trust at the beach. Besides, Raven is there to help her if needed."

"We won't be able to keep them inside for much longer," Emma pointed out. "They are already the size of large dogs. Soon they won't fit through the doors."

"I know, but I don't want to put my babies out in the wild just yet." There was a whiny tone in her voice, though Diana knew the witch was just playing.

"By the way, I've been meaning to ask," Diana started. "When will the others cross the Tier 7 threshold? By my math, it should be soon, and I would rather get Emma free as soon as possible."

"Glynda and Tsunade reached Tier 7 two weeks ago, a bit after Mikael started the third game," Medea said casually. "Priscilla, because she started a bit later, only crossed it a few days ago. We are only waiting for Robin. Since she was Tier 5 when she appeared on the Island, she has about a 75-litre difference from the others. She'll reach the tipping point after she takes her last dose at lunch in ten days. Each of those pills I give you with every meal is 1 litre of compressed blood."

"Are you certain?" Wonder Woman couldn't help but ask. "I do not want to put Emma at risk if we miscalculate the dosage."

"I've run the number dozens of times. I am as certain as can be."

"I do not mean to doubt you," Diana continued. "I thought the entire point was that when someone reached Tier 7 by dragon blood, they assume draconic elements and turn into one themselves. As far as I know, no one has turned into a dragon. Can we trust that Emma will be all right without that side effect?"

"No one told you?" Medea asked, staring at the brunette in surprise.

"Told me what?"

"We cannot change," Emma explained. "Physically, I mean. Something is preventing

all permanent changes in our bodies. While I am in my diamond form, I have been able to lift about 2 tons in the past. My base strength, however, has only been slightly greater than average. Despite all the training we've been doing over the last few months, I have put on no muscle and am not stronger in any way."

"Really?" Wonder Woman couldn't help but wonder.

"We only realized it when Tsunade started giving us check-ups," Medea continued from the blonde. "She pointed out how odd it was for people, especially those who eat as much and are as active as us, to remain the same weight over a month with not even a little change. For the Servants, it would make sense. We are summoned at our peak and are half spiritual. The others? Not so much."

"Could it be because we are dead? Most undead I know are not able to grow." Diana asked. As she did so, she watched Artoria lay flat on a telekinetic platform, Glynda slowly lowering it into the water.

"That was a possibility we considered," the witch nodded but denied the conclusion. "We tested it with Priscilla. She is still alive, barely ever trained a day in her life, and was the one that would have the most variance. Despite getting better at fighting, she has developed no new muscles."

"That must be painful," Diana frowned. If the dragon girl was not developing muscle and muscle memory, their training was like the first day all over again. "I suppose if she trained so rarely, Priscilla would not know how odd her situation is."

"Next, we tested if we were 'Tier Locked', as it were," Medea continued to explain their scientific process. "Maybe we cannot get stronger without going up a Tier? That isn't the case either. Robin had gone from Tier 5 when first summoned to 6 and is almost at 7. Her powers are more varied, she unlocked Conquerors Haki when it wasn't possible before, and she has lost her weakness to water. Despite this, her physical stats have not changed in the least."

"So it is just our bodies then? Does it just prevent growth or any physical change?" It should be remembered that, despite being a very physical fighter, Wonder Woman had also been blessed by Athena to have great wisdom. While she was no scientist or mage, she was smart enough to keep up with the best of them.

"Any physical deviation," Emma said, flipping herself over on her chair. "Think of it like the halfway point between reality and what happens when Mikael summons us. We can affect the world, but it cannot affect us."

"A good analogy, but not exactly right." Medea downed the last of her drink and waved her hands. A simple dislocation spell conjured another glass from the distant bar into her hand, this one red instead of blue. "It is not that we cannot be affected physically.

We've all been hurt in training and needed Tsunade to patch us up. Any physical change is reset as soon as the moon sets in the morning."

"The moon?" Diana asked.

"A lot of things are tied to the Moon here. While celestial objects have always been important to magic. Since this is a demi-plane more than a pocket space-"

"Don't ask," Emma suddenly spoke up. She interrupted Medea's speech and Diana, who was going to ask about the difference. The blonde did not even look at them, staying face down on her chair as she answered their silent question. "I do not need to read your minds to know that you would ask Diana. And if you did, Medea would have gone on a long tangent that I don't feel like listening to."

"Anyway," the witch blushed a little at the accurate remark. "Despite not being 'real' celestial bodies, not extending past the Jewel, the sun, moon, and stars still affect things. My descent from Helios led me to initially assume that the sun was more important. But I recently discovered the Moon is a crucial factor in many aspects of the Island."

"How so?" A minor aspect of Artemis's blessing meant that Diana was always aware of the phase of the moon. An almost useless part, except for that one time she fought a werewolf.

"Much like the sun, it rises and sets at the same time every day. I thought we were summoned only when the sun was up, but I realized that the sun rises at roughly 6:30 but sets at 8:30. The moon, on the other hand, rises at precisely 9pm. Due to the angle of the island mountains, I didn't realize it was still faintly visible until it set at exactly 9am. We aren't being summoned with the sun is up, but when the moon is gone. That is the only time our time and Mikael's time can line up."

"While that is interesting to hear," Diana smiled diplomatically at her fellow greek. Seeing her get so animated about a subject was nice, even if they had drifted off-topic. "How does this relate to our physical state?"

"I was getting to that. If we are hurt, train, or have any other physical change, it all gets reset as soon as the moon sets at 9." Medea said in a huff. "Scathach and Tsunade helped me test it. No matter how grave the injury, it disappears in a moment. Since then, we have tried to see if other things align with that time frame. We've only had two successes. All creatures that die after 9 am are resummed the following day. Any new biome or environment Mikael encounters? They, too, only appear at 9 am."

"So, what does it all mean?"

"We have no idea," Emma piped up. "For every mystery we solve, another takes its place."

"I am sorry to say she is right," Medea winced. "The process of discovery and testing

is fascinating. We know time is convoluted. That has been consistent throughout this entire experience. We managed to line some things up, but we are no closer to the 'WHY?' of everything. We have dozens of theories, but nothing we can test."

"I find this all rather frustrating," Diana admitted. Despite her words, she did quirk a smile as Artoria finally managed to stay afloat on her back without support. "As good a company as you all are, and as enjoyable as this Island has proven to be, I am going a bit crazy. I always feel like this is one significant buildup, one massive plan from a being who we have seen neither hide nor hair of. If they want something from us, why have they not asked? If it is Death, why go through all this?"

There was a few moments of silence as the women on the beach contemplated their situation.

"In my experience," Medea spoke up after a minute, simmering anger filling her tone. "This is the norm. Higher powers always mess with those lesser than them. They like to see us struggle, and when they grow bored, we are discarded. They never care for innocence or guilt, morality or faith. All they care for is their own capricious whims. And when the chips fall? Then they sit on their high thrones and judge you."

Diana remained silent as the Witch of Betrayal stood and made her way to the water. Emma, too, did not say a word.

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"They are getting frustrated," Diana said suddenly. The words had slipped out while she was lost in thought.

The pair had been walking in companionable silence for the last ten minutes, enjoying the night air. Irithyll was a beautiful city. The gentle falling snow, silver buildings, and crescent moon painted a beautiful tableau. It was a crisp and cool night. Though Mikael's breath fogged the air with every breath, Diana's did not.

She could not feel the cold.

Shadow figures would occasionally dart from dark alleys to attack her companion, sometimes many at once. He dealt with them efficiently, either with his blade or flames. Knights and clerics walked the main roads. They posed a more significant threat, though Mikael could overcome them too.

Wonder Woman watched all the battles she could as the pair made their way deeper into the metropolis. Mikael had explained that his target was the massive cathedral in the center, miles away from their starting position on the bridge. This was the first time Diana had the chance to actually be part of Mikael's journey. Every time she was summoned,

they remained stationary in a ‘safe’ place.

It was enlightening.

The last ten minutes of silence had been the longest her companion had gone without being attacked. It seemed like a shadow hag would ambush him every step they took. Beyond every corner was a priest casting a spell or knights waiting to charge.

Mikael had told her kingdoms and civilizations were converging on Lothric as the fire faded. Their proximity, he said, reduced the time it would take to beat the game. Each of those held millions of inhabitants, most all mad in undeath. They all stood between her summoner and his objective.

There had been times when Diana wondered why it took Mikael decades to clear one ‘game’. With his skills, surely he could do it faster. The enemies were a problem, but so was the sheer distance. Every time he died, he lost days of progress. Since he wasn’t hollowed, he retained his connection to the bonfires and reformed at the most recent one where he rested. That could be miles away.

By that point, either the undead he had killed had reformed, or more had filled in the holes. Since one death was such a setback, he had to proceed carefully each time. He never knew how many enemies there were or where they could have moved.

She did not know how many beings he had killed alone in the last two hours. She lost track after the first hundred. If this was the norm, he would have a more significant body count than almost all the villains she had faced in her life. In fact, if he only killed one hundred a day, he would have a higher body count than in most wars.

Though his foes were undead, Diana had to wonder about the mentality of a man who could do all that.

“Hm?” Mikael made a noise in question at her words.

“The other women,” the amazon clarified as she returned to the here and now. “Many of them are worried that, so close to the end of your journey, you will go through with what you promised and leave us. Them, I mean. You said a few more weeks on our end, correct?”

“That’s right,” though he answered her, his eyes never stopped roaming the street. He was always looking for foes that could spring at any moment.

“Surely by now, you realize their feelings are genuine? Would it be so wrong to return their affections?”

“Wrong? No. Dangerous? Yes.”

“How come?” Diana asked. Michael remained silent, his lips pressed into a frown. “Medea has been using your blood to help us ascend tiers.” Mikael nodded but didn’t say anything, so she continued. She was taking a risk, but she knew they had to do something

drastic. “Once we’ve all consumed enough to qualify for Tier 7, she plans on using her Noble Phantasm on Emma.”

That got a reaction.

Mikael whirled on her, staring at her with wide eyes. He looked worried, panicked even. Despite that, Diana continued to talk.

“We’ll be taking all precautions we can, we’ll do it right before her next summoning, so if anything goes wrong, you can reimpose the Command. But one way or the other, we are all committed to getting Emma free. It wouldn’t be fair to have her bound like that, nor is it wise to keep secrets for so long. Especially from those that only want to help.”

“Free? Fair?” He said incredulously. The man stared at Diana, but she met his eyes resolutely.

She knew that people were entitled to their secrets, but she believed that if it was going hurt people, expressly her newfound family, it was better to know. Was this a bit unfair to Mikael? Yes, but they wouldn’t have needed to go this far if he had been honest from the start. Diana couldn’t understand why, after all this time, he could not trust them. She had faced this same struggle with Bruce several times. Sometimes obstinacy was needed.

He turned away, pausing a moment before starting to speak.

“Imagine,” he started to say, piecing his words together like a puzzle. “Imagine you are torn away from everything you ever know. You wake up in a cell naked. You are branded by a curse, one designed to drive you mad. You do everything you can to escape. Over and over, you try to climb the walls, break down the door, anything you can think of. Nothing works. You are in that cell for months, waiting for someone to free you. No companions, no one to talk to. The same four walls. But something is urging you on, never to give up. So you keep trying. One attempt finally kills you. A bashed-in skull from trying to climb to the ceiling.”

Diana remained silent, letting Mikael vent. The story pained her, but she wanted to know where he was going with it.

“You wake up in the same place you died, knowing you died and will never escape. You keep trying anyway. You are not able to die nor give up. Then one day, poof,” Mikael made a little gesture, tossing some light snow in the air. “Someone appears in your cell. Great! The only problem is that someone is a fictional character and can’t interact with the world. You’ve clearly gone mad, but ‘hey, what the hell? If I’m mad, let’s see how this goes.’ you think to yourself. The madness remains consistent, though you start to feel hope. ‘Maybe there is a way out after all.’”

“You still think we are figments of your imagination?” Diana asked incredulously.

Mikael shook his head.

“I am trying to get you to see things through my perspective for a bit. I do agree communication is important, but so is understanding where the other stands.” He said before continuing his story. “Then something happens. One of the figments of your imagination, one of the women you imagined into existence, does something stupid. She at once proves that she exists to you and that all these delusions are more of a threat to your freedom than the cell ever was.”

“You know we are not,” the amazon interrupted. “We want to help. Why can’t you trust us on that? We are no threat. Even Emma had no malicious intent when she entered your mind.”

“So you get desperate, trying to seize all the control you can from the situation.” He continued as if uninterrupted. “Step one? Get out of the cell ASAP. The following companion summoned gives you an idea. You’re not connected to a bonfire, so you reform precisely when your body falls. What if most of your body is outside? So you start working, cutting your limbs on the bars and passing them through until all that is left is one arm you use to force your skull through and then separate it from your torso. The only part that doesn’t fit.”

Diana swallowed back the bile in her throat. Mikael had never told anyone how he escaped the Asylum. The man did not pay her horror any mind. He had said all that in a monotone as if recounting the weather. Now his voice picked up as if recalling a happy memory.

“You are finally free of the cell! The gamble worked! More than that, you discover that you can minimize contact with these threats. Instead of spending a few hours a week with them, you can reduce it to a few a month. You cannot force them to leave. Even if you could, it would risk tipping your hand. The following month is spent fighting and dying as you go through demons and hordes of undead. That pattern repeats for decades. You can never rest, never relax. You are trapped in a world, in a mind you know is not your own. Your companions, your only aid, are your biggest threats. But you care for them. You want to help them as well. You would never hurt them if you could. They saved you after all. Can you imagine all that, Diana?”

“I can,” she said, her throat dry.

“Good,” he looked her in the eye. “Now, despite all that, you would ask me to be open to my wardens? To give away my weakness and risk never achieving the freedom and life that drives me? You would ask me to place shackles on myself as I stand only a few years away from my prison break?”

“No,” she denied. “I would ask you to trust us. Trust that no matter what, we are on

your side. That we are not your wardens. We, they, love you. Entrust your weakness to us, whatever it is, so we can prove you wrong. We are going to be together forever. You will have to trust us at some point."

"There would be a way for me to trust you," he said. The command seals glowed brightly enough that the light shown through his armour. "I got these because they were cheap and practical. It would be easy too. I would have to start with Medea, of course. Her Noble Phantasm would be the most dangerous threat. All my seals regenerate between summonings. I'm sure I could devise a combination of six commands that would bend any of you to my will. From there, any time anyone is summoned, I simply repeat the process. It would be easy. All it would take would be that I need to abandon the last notions of my humanity, my own values."

Despite his words, the heroine felt no danger and met him eye to eye. Perhaps sensing her determination, maybe simply giving up, Mikael turned away from her and slumped. Diana's heart clenched at the sight, but she remained firm.

"I suppose this is what I get for being too clever," he said wryly. "I can't even order you not to free Emma without going for the nuclear option. Medea would simply use Rule Breaker on you too. I also doubt that any order would stick forever. Emma's has stuck around so long because I refresh them every time she is summoned. And none of you would ever forgive me if I tried. I guess I am being hypocritical. Who am I to stand between a prisoner and freedom?"

There was a long moment when the man gathered his thoughts. Diana kept silent until he took a deep breath, straightened his spine and looked at her again. Though he was only a few inches taller than her six-foot frame, Wonder Woman was pierced by the intense look in his brown eyes. She had known he was a warrior, had watched him battle with great skill, but he was always so gentle with her and the other women that it hadn't really connected in her mind. There was once laughter, warmth and affection in those brown pools. Only steely determination remained as he looked at her, judging her.

This was a man who killed kingdoms. Who slaughtered gods and demons and absorbed their souls. Who, after decades of slaughter and death, after experiencing all the pain the world had to offer, still stood again. This was a man who became a Lord of Cinder twice over.

Diana met those eyes, heart beating wildly in her chest.

"There's nothing I could do to change your minds?" He asked, knowing the answer.

"Nothing," she said resolutely, ensuring her voice was steady and even.

"And you all will accept the consequences of your actions? No matter what they are?"

"We will."

In the future, Diana would look back at this moment wryly. Though it would mark a short downturn in their relationship, it would also be the moment that she decided that falling in love with him was the right thing.

“Very well, a compromise then,” he nodded in acceptance. Flames gathered in his hands, and great balls of chaotic magma flooded the street as dozens of shadow hags screamed in pain as their ashen flesh melted away. “Next time Emma is summoned, I’ll remove the Command to never talk about what she knows. It will be safer that way. Less risk of backsliding.”

As Diana stood amidst the magma rapidly cooling in the night air, she realized two things. Firstly, though she had won the argument and gotten the transparency she wanted, she still felt like she had lost something. Mikael still did not trust them. He was simply being blackmailed into her demands. Either he relinquished his Command, or he risked Emma’s health. This entire time, his second priority after being free had always been the well-being of the women of the Island.

The dark red flames licked through her immaterial body and cast flickering shadows on the silver walls. They also illuminated Mikael as he turned from her. His dented and battered armour. The number of weapons he kept out of his bottomless pouches in case any broke. The bow and enchanted arrows he used when needed. The long staff, at once weapon and catalyst. His broad back.

Diana realized a second thing as she watched that back get further away, the magma not harming him.

She could feel the heat.

Author's Note:

This one's going up a bit early today, I finally got a job. Horray for financial security.

Take this one with a grain of salt. Diana is equating Mikael with Batman. There are some parallels but it's not as close a match as she thinks. More on that on Monday. I'm going to finish off Part 3 then with an extra long chapter as an early birthday present for myself, so you can look forward to it.

SOLITUDE III

But soon we must rise, O my heart, we must wander again
Into the war of the world and the strife of the throng;
Let us rise, O my heart, let us gather the dreams that remain,
We will conquer the sorrow of life with the sorrow of song.

"Ten seconds," Medea said.

"I'll see you all in a moment," Emma responded, closing her eyes to lessen the disorientation of the summoning.

All the Island women were gathered in the 'meeting room', the largest of the sitting areas. Diana had returned with news that Mikael would release the mutant from her Command yesterday. Since then, the rest of the group had waited in anticipation for this moment. To avoid being distracted from the discussion, the drakes were housed in an enclosure Scathach and Medea had built in the nearby field.

Once the clock hit 3 pm precisely, the White Queen disappeared. Blink, and you would miss it. Due solely to their familiarity with the process and superhuman senses, the women of the Island saw the blonde's figure blur like a TV out of focus before settling again as the clock's second hand moved one tick.

The change in Emma herself was much more noticeable.

Gone was the determined look on her face, replaced with a forlorn look. She looked near tears, in fact. The blonde slumped, wiping her eyes furiously and sniffling slightly.

"Emma?" Diana asked with concern. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Perhaps the amazon was the wrong person to speak as no sooner had the words left her mouth than Emma rounded on her. Her blue eyes were narrowed in anger and her fists clenched. In fact, those same fists were starting the process of turning into diamonds. Emma took a step towards Wonder Woman, looking ready to strike her.

"Calm down!" Raven, usually so quiet and introverted, shouted. Her voice was still monotone, but there was an edge of warning. "He wouldn't want us to fight." Her words stopped the mutant, though she still glared at Diana.

"Get your lasso," Emma told Wonder Woman, voice seething with rage and pain. "You all want the truth? Fine, you'll get it."

"There is no need," Artoria tried to say diplomatically. "I'm sure we-"

"I want the damn rope!" Emma snarled at the blonde. "By the end of this, I don't want any doubt of what I'm going to say."

"It's fine," Diana said to the king. She had decided to accept whatever the

consequences were of her decision. The amazon left the room to retrieve her enchanted weapon.

While she was gone, an awkward silence filled the seating chamber. Emma collapsed into a chair, her head in her hands. The rage seemed to have left her, leaving her worn and despondent.

“What’s wrong, Emma?” Glynda, who she sat beside, asked softly. Her fellow blonde shook her head, not saying a word.

Diana returned less than a minute later, Glynda and Medea still trying to coax the mutant into speech. Once the amazon entered, Emma did not look at her, simply holding up a hand. The heroine tossed the golden rope into her waiting palm. The White Queen then wrapped it around her left arm, the thread glowing in a golden light.

“I had breast implants,” Emma said suddenly, to the room’s confusion. “My breasts are all natural.”

“Is it not working,” Diana asked after those conflicting statements.

“It’s working,” Emma still did not look at the amazon, eyeing the lasso on her arm in contemplation. “I did have breast implants, but they became natural when I was summoned to the Island. I was testing it. It works off intent. I can’t even think about lying or deceiving people with it on. Though I have the option to not talk.”

“So,” Medea started to say. “What happened?”

“Right,” Emma took a deep breath, calming herself. She looked around the room, ensuring that the entire group met her eyes at least once. “First, give up on making Mikael fall in love with any of us. It is not going to happen while he is trapped.”

“Why not?” Surprisingly it was not Medea, Artoria, Priscilla, or Glynda who asked the question. It was Diana. The amazon had been surprised by how much those words hurt to hear. She wasn’t the only one surprised. The rest of the group turned to her, Emma included, and Wonder Woman fought a blush at their gaze. Then the White Queen started laughing. There was a hysteric and malicious edge to her laughter.

“Oh god, hahahaha, he got you too!” She giggled. “What great timing!”

“Rather than laughing,” Scathach interrupted. Her voice was severe, though there was a bit of pain for those that paid attention. “It would be better for you to explain yourself.”

“Right, hahaha, I suppose I should.” Though Emma giggled a little more, shooting smug looks at Diana, she did calm down. “I suppose I should start with the baseline. Priscilla!” The crossbreed perked up as she was addressed directly. “Mikael. Do you love him?”

“Ah,” the dragon girl reacted with surprise to be asked so bluntly. After a moment, she managed to answer. “While mine Bard is rather fetching, I cannot say that love dost

fill my chest upon thought of him." A few of the women of the Island, such as Artoria, Raven, and Medea, looked at the crossbreed in surprise. Emma simply nodded.

"And that Dragon outside? The massive one?" At the mutant's second question, Priscilla flushed a deep red. She started fumbling with the tip of her tail, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. "Never mind, that is answer enough."

"What was that supposed to show?" Glynda asked, patting the 'younger' girl on the shoulder. She continued to fiddle with her tail, the tips of her ears a deep scarlet.

"I'm trying to prove a point," Emma said seriously. The blonde stood and made her way toward one of the windows. "Priscilla is never summoned, so her perspective isn't twisted. The man we are summoned to isn't Mikael. Not fully. It is a puppet piloted by him. A different puppet in every world. Mikeal is that!" The blonde pointed out over the ocean, white claws barely visible in the sun's light. Beyond those claws was a great white Dragon, larger than the British Isles.

A few of the women did not understand what she was getting at. They all knew the Dragon was Mikael's body. Medea was the first to understand what she was trying to convey.

"Dragon aura," the witch whispered in revelation.

"Mikael wraps around us, constantly bathing us in his aura." Emma smiled sardonically at the group, especially at Diana. "It can't control our mind, but it constantly tempts us. We can resist. Some of us have for a long time. But the second we give in, the second we think that falling in love with Mikael is acceptable and desirable; he has us. There is no escape at that point. By now, the last holdover I knew of has been captured. Unless any of you think eleven different women, with different preferences, all falling in love with the same man makes sense?"

Diana flushed, realizing what Emma was getting at. She hadn't realized the change until she looked back at it now. She had a favourable impression of their summoner for the longest time but had never really categorized him as a romantic interest out of solidarity with Artoria's intentions. Her most recent summoning had changed things.

"I fail to see how that is relevant to getting his romantic interest," Artoria spoke. She seemed uncaring for the revelation. "All of us working together should see greater success in wooing him."

"I'm trying to set a baseline," Emma explained. "I need you all to remember that, no matter that he was once human, Mikael is no longer one. He is a Dragon, millions of years old, and his mind and emotions reflect that."

"Stop stalling, Ice Queen," Yoruichi said, eyeing the mutant like a cat ready to pounce. "We already knew his elements drove you mad. We need other answers."

“His elements did not drive me mad,” Emma shook her head. “They drove Mikael mad. They continue to do so. Specifically his Life element, not Freedom. The latter ensures he will always work towards his Freedom, but the former ensures he never forgets his previous ‘life’. He remembers everything from his birth to his entrapment in his cell with crystal clarity as if carved into his brain. That is why he can never go hollow. His memories never fade. He knows with the bone-deep certainty that there is a world out there, a life he could be living, where he doesn’t have to kill or die. With friends and family, a world far from pain. My madness is of a different sort. But you are right; I should just come out and say it. Mikael cannot fall in love with any of us because it is impossible for him to love us any more than he already does.”

There were a few wide eyes at that. Medea grasped the meaning instantly, the witch recoiling as if struck. Glynda, sweet romantic Glynda, did not see the problem.

“Is that not mission accomplished then?”

“He’s cursed,” the greek witch said softly, her words carrying around the room. “Like Aphrodite did to me for Jason.” There was a major inhale of breath as the other women realized the seriousness of the problem. Medea had not been shy about her sheer hatred for the gods and Jason for the experience.

“Well fuck,” Yoruichi said succinctly. “Though if that is the case, I do not know why he is resisting so much. As shitty as it is, wouldn’t he want to stay with us then? Rather than have us leave, I mean.”

“If he had never realized the severity of the situation, he would have,” Emma nodded, eyes glazed in memory. “But then I did something stupid. While he was still in the cell, I dived deep enough into his mind that I passed the avatar completely. I connected to the Dragon.” The blonde mutant stopped talking, her eyes distant and mouth curling into a smile. Her eyes took on a faraway look, gazing past the room and the Island to the Dragon in the sky. There was a fire in them, a passion most of those gathered identified as fanaticism. This was a woman preaching about her god.

“You all cannot understand what it was like. That mind was so massive and grand. A being that rivals Galactus or the Pheonix, millions of years old. For a moment, just a moment, I was part of something beyond humanity. And it loved me. It was the kind of love of fairy tales. The all-consuming, passionate and gentle love that carves itself into legend. His every thought was bent on ensuring our safety and happiness. An experience like that, it changes a woman.”

“It drove you mad,” Raven said plainly. Emma did not respond, wiping the drool accumulated on her chin at the memory. “Not his elements.”

“After he used a command seal to remove me from his mind, he asked me to tell him

what I discovered. I was a bit frantic at that point, so I revealed everything. I just wanted to go back to that feeling." Emma looked a bit sheepish as she explained. "I should have been more circumspect. Once he discovered his mind and emotions had been tampered with without realizing it, that is when his elements really came into play. He bent his Freedom element to resisting his own mind and its urges. Every time we are summoned, his at war with himself. That is why he is so emotional in our presence. It is all he can do not to bend to our every whim. But he cannot ignore a direct order from us. If we were to tell him to sit still for an eternity? He would do so, his Freedom be damned."

"That is why he wanted to keep it a secret," Medea said. "If Jason did not know of his influence on me, many terrible things could have been prevented. You both devised the sanity lie to ensure I didn't use Rule Breaker."

"One of my suggestions. It was easy to pass on since it was close to the truth. Mikael initially wanted me to forget as well," Emma said, compelled by the lasso to bring the truth to light rather than let her previous lies remain. "His second order was to forget everything I saw in his mind. The only reason I know that is because I dove right back into his mind as soon as I realized my memories were tampered with. He had to use another to get me out, then another to ensure I never did it again. His final two were to order me to ensure I never used the influence we possess over him and to never reveal what we discovered. The last of which he just released me from."

"So he never healed you? Never ordered you to regain your sanity?" Robin asked, realizing she had been lied to multiple times. "Why not order you to forget again?"

"I found out instantly last time my memories were removed. My psychic abilities are not for show, you know? Rather than risk the same mistake, he went with another plan. You were right about Mikael being smart enough not to use a vague order like that." Emma shrugged, unconcerned about her previous lies. "He simply helped me work through what I felt in his mind the old-fashioned way. We sat and talked. He is no psychologist, but sometimes a sympathetic ear is all you need. I recovered enough to fake it. Mikael didn't notice the change in me since we were so new to each other then. I then offered myself as a co-conspirator. By the end, we not only had numerous different lies worked out when you all got curious about his shifting behaviour."

"And he never realized the depth of your change," Raven noted doubtfully. Emma shrugged again.

"So you've been lying to us this entire time," Tsunade spoke, eyes narrowed at her fellow blonde. "Why should we trust you now?"

"Because of this," Emma lifted her arm, the one wrapped in the Lasso of Truth. "Besides, all my plans are out the window. Lying now does nothing. You all would have

realized the most crucial part as soon as Robin was summoned tonight."

"Why?" The pirate asked.

"Because, going forward, Mikael will use the same order whenever we are summoned now. 'Never command me!' He wants to ensure that now that we know we can control him, we will never be able to use our influence. He will refresh it every summoning in case Medea uses Rule Breaker to free us from the Command. We essentially have unlimited Command Seals with him. He wants to make sure we cannot use them."

"He does not trust us?" Artoria looked affronted as if the very idea of using her new influence was repulsive.

"You are still not getting where Mikael is coming from," Emma shook her head. "He knows his feelings for us are foreign, so he fights them. If they were not, he wouldn't have a problem. Even then, if he could convince himself he could fall in love with us, then maybe, just maybe, he could come to trust us. But ask yourself this; could any of you fall in love with someone you saw for a few hours once a year?" The room remained silent, aware of the answers in their hearts. "To us, he takes us on 'dates' every other day or so. To him? He has to take notes on any conversation we have so he doesn't forget them before the next time we are summoned."

"So what did you want, Ice Queen? You said you had a plan before this? What was it?" Yoruichi asked, trying to shift the subject slightly from her own blindness. The women had known for a while that time was different between the Island and Mikael, but they hadn't pieced together just how it would affect their romantic prospect.

"I want his babies," the mutant deadpanned. More than one of the women blushed at the thought, but Emma continued. "I want to follow him for eternity. I want to help him conquer worlds, travel the globe or the stars. I want him to marry me. To bend me over a desk and fuck me till I pass out. I want to bring him any women he finds attractive. I do not want to be left behind. If I can make my ex-husband," the mutant almost spat the words, "successful enough to run the greatest mutant school and team, then with Mikael, there is nothing he and I could not accomplish together."

The lasso continued to glow, ensuring the truth of her words. More than one woman had lost themselves in fantasy at her wishes, though a few had remained focused on the key concepts she hadn't addressed.

"I suppose we were some women you wanted him to bed?" Scathach did not seem affronted by the idea, but her tone was unimpressed. Emma simply shrugged. "Now we know why he is so insistent on leaving us behind. We are too much of a risk to him. You said we wouldn't be able to make him fall in love with us while the time difference is so great. How were you planning on fixing that issue yourself?"

“No matter when he gets free,” Emma explained, “he will have to stop by the Island at least once to pick up all the supplies he has left here.”

“The bottomless chests, they have all the arms and armour he could want,” Medea said in realization, shaken from her fantasy of blue-eyed, brown-haired, pointy-eared children.

“And he will need to talk to Priscilla,” Emma nodded at the dragon girl. “Without knowing if someone he bit, bound rather than summoned, also exerts control over him, he will never be able to offer the benefits of the catalogue to anyone. Despite being tempted several times, he hasn’t bound anyone since Priscilla because he doesn’t know if it will increase the chains around his neck.”

“And when he is on the Island, we will have the opportunity to convince him without fear of the time disconnect,” Scathach nodded. “It’s a solid plan. How likely is it now? Does he still intend to return to the Island now that we know of our influence?”

“I don’t know!” Emma whirled on Diana. “His mental shields are more substantial than any I have ever seen from those who are not immune. He must have been practicing using Mental Talent since the cell. Whatever trust he had with me is gone. I should never have gone along with your plan. He used to let me into his mind, so long as I did not connect to the Dragon. Now, I cannot access it at all.”

“I am not sorry,” Diana said, meeting the mutant’s eyes. “While this turn of events is regretful, deception is no way to base a relationship. If we were to engage with him as equals, we needed to know this information. Now, should he come to trust us again, it will be knowing that we consciously choose not to exert our power over him.”

“So long as he can trust us again,” Emma snarled.

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“God damn it, Gael!” I cursed, my back aching from the effort of moving so much dirt. Like all pain, it was slightly muted as an undead, but it was still annoying. Digging graves used different muscles than swinging weapons. I had used all my Estus in the fights, and even now, my wounds bled.

“You crotchety old bastard! Why did you have to be so stubborn?” I whipped my wet eyes. Stupid dust. “Aria’s going to be sad now. She’s been waiting for you. You lasted till the end of the bloody world! Why did you give in now! We didn’t need all your blood at once. A bit at a time would have done the trick. Why didn’t you listen to me?”

I spent the next twenty minutes making sure the grave was deep enough. The shifting sands did not make it easy, but I wasn’t willing to let the man remain too close to the

surface. I had no idea what else had survived to the End of the World, but the man I knew did not deserve to have his body desecrated.

Eventually, the hole was deep enough for me to feel safe enough to lower the body down. Gael's armour was rent and torn, his red hood only hung by tatters. Both his crossbow and sword had been split in the fight.

"You killed me six times," I said over his body. He looked peaceful in death. The bastard. "I haven't died that many times to a single enemy in centuries. Even the Nameless King only got me four times. You tough son-of-a-bitch."

Before I began the process of re-burying him, I gathered my magic. First, Repair his equipment. I had to cast it a few times, but eventually, he was good as new. Well, as good as I could make him. The greatsword was still heavily chipped and stained with blood. It was the only weapon he kept with him throughout his journey. The crossbow was covered with twists and dinks, rusted with blood, and made highly brittle from overuse. It had been modified to allow the Slave Knight to fight a host of foes alone. Both had been worn for so long that the damage and stains were part of their identity.

Then, I gathered my internal Flame into my hands. The Flame of my soul responded readily, as it had for the centuries I had wielded it. I cast Iron Flesh on the corpse. The spell was meant to be used on the caster, but my expertise let me adapt it to a new purpose.

Finally, I left the grave. Staring down at the Slave Knight, I gathered my last spell in my chest. It rose through my throat and out of my mouth. The White Dragon Breath spell wrapped the fallen man in crystal. His body would never decay, never be infected by parasites. I did not know what lay beyond the End of the World, but this was as good as I could do to ensure his rest was never disturbed.

Gael was the only one to last as long as I. He alone understood the weight of the years. Though I would outlive him, he had been a Slave Knight since before my summoning. He never hollowed and never waivered. He went against Gwyn, his previous master, to do what he felt was right.

"I'll make sure Aria is taken care of." I talked to both the corpse and the soul in my hand. I knew he couldn't hear me, but grieving was for the living, not the dead. "That's what I named your mistress since she didn't have one. I'll ensure she gets the blood, your soul, and finishes her painting. It will be a good home. I'll ensure she is cared for after I leave and that only good people find it."

I stared at the man for a moment, a lump in my throat.

"Stupid sand," I rubbed my eyes, clearing the wetness from them. "You broke my streak, you cunt-waffle. For three damn games, I've made sure everyone gets a happy

ending of some sort. But you had to be damn stubborn. I hope you can rest. You did your duty."

Duty in the souls' games was a blessing and a curse. It gave the undead purpose, delaying their hollowing and pushing them forward. I had used it many times to ensure as happy an end as possible for those I could save.

I buried him, leaving only a small tombstone to mark the location. I carefully place the barrel full of blood of the Dark Soul into my bottomless box. It was marked, so I did not get confused with the other barrels full of my own blood. Unlike this ass-hat, I was smart enough to take a little bit at a time.

I would pass them on to the next woman summoned. I would have to consult my notes, but it was either Yoruichi or Raven. I always had trouble remembering the order of summonings. The time was coming, the energy bubbling up in my chest. I remembered Robin, I think she didn't have too many issues with the Command, but I would have to consult my notes again to ensure.

I started to walk away, back to the bonfire I could use to get back to Ariandel. I hummed under my breath, the only song I felt appropriate for Gael's dirge.

"When once, long ago
I was worn down and abused
The strongest took the spoils
And then we fell at their shoes
But now they are gone
And my sanity's kept by my chains
So I bear them both in faith and hate
For family and all that remains."

I left the tombstone at the end of the world, knowing no one would ever find it without my help.

'Here lies Gael'
'The Red Hood was the last of man to fall'
'Finally released from his duty'

******

"How is she?" I asked, eyeing the pale girl sitting before the canvas. The flames licked the room though they did not burn the wood. They did fill the church attic with a heat haze, however.

“As ever, my lord,” Sirris responded. “She has awaited your return most eagerly.”

“Did you need to fight any of Corvians?” I had worried that the crow-like people would disturb Aria and my knight. I’m sure some remnants of Friede’s followers were out there somewhere. I knew Aria would not die, but she could be imprisoned again.

“Nay, they stayed well clear of the chapel.”

“Thank you, Sirris,” I patted her on the shoulder. She shifted awkwardly at the touch. Undead could not feel pleasure in the touch of others. Most stayed away from each other due to paranoia that anyone could turn hollow at any moment.

“I simply do as you will, My Lord.”

“I know, and I appreciate it,” I said as I walked passed her towards the small woman in front of the canvas. “Your duty is not a thankless one. You are the knight protecting the hope of this world.” ‘When I cannot’, went unsaid.

That was only part of the truth. When Sirris had sworn herself into my service, she did not know I would put her to work so quickly. Protecting Aria was important, but giving the undead a task they could focus on also kept them from hollowing. The happiest end I could give Sirris without binding her to me for eternity and possibly placing another shackle on my neck.

“My thanks, Ashen One,” Aria said as I lay the barrel of blood beside her. “With this will I paint a world. I would name this painting after thee as thou hast named me.”

“Don’t,” I said, shaking my head. “Where I come from, Mikael means ‘like god’. This is a world for man and should be named after one.” I pulled Gael’s soul from my box and presented it to her.

“I see,” Aria stared at the dark, pulsing soul for a moment before returning to the canvas. “Keep it. Uncle would want you to have it. This painting, twill be a cold, dark, and very gentle place. One day, it will make someone a goodly home. Then I will name this painting ‘Gael’.”

“A good name. Goodbye, Aria,” I ruffled her hair as I walked away. Before leaving via bonfire, I turned to my knight one final time.

“Sirris of the Sunless Realms!” I said imperiously.

“My Lord!” She saluted in the manner of the dark moon, kneeling on the floor with her hand outstretched.

“I shall hold you to your oath,” I continued, fighting to keep my face stoic and commanding. I wasn’t one for a ceremony, but I did have a flair for dramatics. “Your final and greatest duty is thus; You are to guard Aria until the painting is complete. Once so, you are to take it to Firelink. All those who currently reside there have my full trust. You are to ensure they and Aria enter this new world. You may also bring in Yorshka, should

she wish it. You shall then hide the painting so no unworthy may ever find it."

"Where shall that be, my Lord?"

"Use this homeward bone," I presented it to the kneeling knightess, who took it slowly. "I have attuned it to a bonfire at the ends of time. There you will find a grave. Place the painting at its foot. You are then to enter and begin your endless vigil. You will ensure that this new world is forever peaceful and Aria remains safe and happy. This is your duty. Can I entrust it to you, my knight?"

"Your will be done, My Lord," I nodded imperiously once more and turned away. I barely heard her whisper. "Thank you."

I teleported out, wiping the wetness from my eye. Stupid smoke.

******

I reappeared in Firelink Shrine. I still had a few loose ends to take care of. The Firekeeper waived at my arrival, and I waved back, but she would be my last stop here.

My first stop was hidden in the rafters of the shrine.

"I swear, if you try and kick me down this ledge one more time, I'm going to feed you your own spear," I said, twisting away from Patches' kick. The bald man tried to ambush me regularly, knowing that the fall wouldn't kill me.

"Tiss just a joke," he grinned, unrepentant as ever. "You know, you get these…urges… running the business and all…Oh, and I hate myself for it, I do."

"That was one of your earliest excuses," I retorted, falling into the old rhythm. "You used it five years ago. Try and be a bit more creative with your next victim, alright?"

"So you intend to relight the fire," he asked, suddenly serious.

"No way," I responded. I had served as kindling for it twice already. No thank you! "Fuck the gods, fuck the fire, and fuck this Age."

"Aye, my friend, fuck them all," Patches' grinned. Despite his kicking habit, which he hadn't kicked yet, (ha) we got along pretty well. There was a reason that, despite using everything at my disposal, I had never been able to cast a miracle in my life.

"Listen," I said. "I'm going to change this world, put the flame out of its misery. I do not know what it will look like after that. I've taken steps to give everyone a chance. Soon Sirris, you remember her? Anyway, she'll be by with a painting. You all should enter it. I need you to make sure everyone goes in as well."

"When you say, everyone…" Patches grimaced, his question unfinished.

"Everyone that is currently here except for Yuria. She'll never leave the new age." His grimace deepened, but I remained insistent. "Yes, that includes Eygon and Irina. I know

clerics aren't the best, but they haven't done anything to deserve being left behind."

"Fine, fine," he waved me away. At his core, I knew Patches' dislike for the gods and their clerics was due to how much they had fucked humanity over. I should trust in his good nature, for all he was tricky, Patches had retained his humanity for longer than most were alive.

I left him there with a final goodbye. I then bid adieu to Greirat, the Hag, Cronyx, Eygon and Irina. I told them everything about the painting and the coming age I could. They had been with me for the last seven years since I first set foot in the shrine. I owed them a lot. My second to last stop before the Firekeeper was at Karla's little alcove.

"I know not why you would offer such an opportunity to I, wretched child of the Abyss that I am." She said after I had given her the same information I had the others. "This new world of yours would be better without one such as I."

"Did I ever tell you about the legends of another child of the Abyss?" I asked rhetorically. "She became a queen, you see. Of a kingdom of ice and ivory. She had intended to lead it to ruin as her sisters did the same to other kingdoms."

"Ay," Karla nodded gravely. "Children of the abyss bring naught but suffering to those around."

"But then there was a twist," I continued, ignoring her interruption. "The king she was meant to drive to ruin, she fell in love with him. Though he would eventually perish, Alsanna would remain to watch over his last work. She alone would ensure that his legacy and kingdom would remain safe."

"What is the purpose of you telling me such a fable?"

"Because she was not the only Daughter of the Abyss to find love," I said seriously. I reached into my box, withdrew a finger-thin book, and presented it to Karla.

"What is this? A new tome for me to unravel?" Karla asked. Opening the first page, she froze.

"In a way," I said, starting to walk away. "It's the notes of Zullie the Witch, Daughter of the Abyss. It records her notes on spells, her experiences with her lover Alva, and a message to their daughter." She didn't move or respond, staring at the first page.

I left her alcove. Some things were meant to be kept private.

I did not go far. Andres' blacksmith station was only a few feet away.

"That was a kind thing you did," the grey-haired man said, his voice a deep rumble. For once, he wasn't working on something.

"How much did you overhear?"

"Enough," the old blacksmith said simply. "That knight girl will be by with a painting, and I should enter it. I imagine they will need weapons and armour in this new world as

this one did."

"That's the long and short of it," I nodded. I stared at Andre for a moment; I wanted to say so many things. In the end, he wouldn't remember. Patches didn't either. So I turned away to go meet the Firekeeper. "Take care of yourself, Andre."

"You remind me of someone, lad." I stopped. "A young kid I knew an age ago. Could barely fight. Broke all his weapons. Begged me to teach him how to care for his favourite halberd properly. A hopeless case all around. I expected him to go hollow in a week."

"And? What's your point?" I asked, keeping the knot in my throat out of my voice.

"Funny thing is, he stuck around." Andre continued. "For decades, he kept coming back to have me work on his arms and armour. That scrawny kid managed to kill Gwyn himself. He was the first Lord of Cinder after the Lord of Sunlight. Linked the fire and everything."

"Sounds like an idiot. Only idiots link the fire." I started to walk away again, my feet heavy.

"Ay," Andre rumbled a chuckle. "He was kind of an idiot. But the good kind, the kind with the best intentions. You could tell every time you talked to him. Whenever he walked away, he would tell everyone the same thing. It showed he cared."

I kept walking away.

"Don't you dare go hollow, Mikael!"

Stupid ash, getting in my eyes.

******

I hated the end of the souls' games.

When I was alive, I hated them because it meant the game was over. There were no more lands to see. Lore diving and the new game plus were always fun, but the sheer enjoyment of beating one of the games for the first time was over.

Here, the end of the game was a process that took me years, decades even. It was the culmination of a long journey. It was one step closer to the Freedom I so craved. But it also meant it was time to say goodbye to all those who had been with me on my journey. Most I was able to give a happy ending to, in one form or another. There were, of course, some exceptions but, by and large, I liked to think I left each world a slightly better place than I found it.

I hoped this would be the last goodbye.

Maybe I would have to go through Demon Souls or Bloodborne after this, but I hoped this would be the last time.

As I watched the silver portal dissolve, taking Yoruichi and my bottomless box to an island paradise I had never seen, I regretted the necessity of it all.

I regretted having to bind the women with seals for my peace of mind. I knew most would never think to use their power over me. I knew that many had professed their love for me. Something like that sticks with you over the centuries. I knew they might even mean it. I also knew that, though they had the best intentions, it would only take one careless sentence, one stray thought on their part, and I would die.

Emma hadn't known that telling me to 'Sit still and let me in!' in a moment of frustration would have me paralyzed. I sat there, unable to move, unable to do anything as a foreign mind violated my most sacred of places. Only when she connected to the Dragon was her order considered fulfilled, and I could move again.

The next time it happened, there was a chance it wouldn't be my body controlled. My personality whipped away, my body being driven by someone with my memories, but who wouldn't be me. Call me paranoid if you wish, but I was staring down the nozzle of a Russian Roulette game that never ended. A slip was all it took. Someone getting frustrated and saying something like 'Change!' or 'Don't lie to me!' Statistics told me it was a mathematical certainty, whether it happened in a century or an eon.

No, thank you. Better to not take the risk at all.

I turned from where the silver portal once was and faced off the Kiln of the First Flame.

On my way to the dreg heap, I had been here before, but the sight was still as beautiful. I never got to see a total eclipse while alive, so that was a new experience I could enjoy. It was more visible here than anywhere else in the kingdom. Red flowers dotted the ash that filled the area. Swords and other weapons rose like grave markers. I wondered if Miyazki took inspiration from a particular work of unlimited blades.

The area did not look like a kiln anymore, more a crater of molten slag and ash.

I still shuddered in phantom pain. For a moment, I was burning again. A fire that reached my soul and never ended. A lonely pain that lasted for thousands of years, no matter how much I begged it to end.

I blinked, and the fire was gone. I was once more alone on a field of cinders.

Yuria had attempted to come along or offer one of her hollows as support.

I had declined.

This was between me and the First Flame.

******

I do not know how long the battle raged on.

The Soul of Cinder towered over me, twice my height. It changed patterns again in a burst of flame, the sword shifting into a talisman. It leaped away and cast miracles to repel me and heal itself. I dodged the bolt of lightning, but it remained stationary long enough for me to shift to my bow. An enchanted arrow took it in the eye. It howled, sword shifting to a rapier and lunging at me. I managed to put the bow away and draw my Irithyll sword in time to block. The flames of its blade met the ice of mine in a burst of steam.

I had cut off a limb no less than twelve times, impaled it ten times, and separated its head from its neck thrice. I wasn't sure how many times it had died and reformed, but it was over fifty. Whenever the damage reached a certain threshold, it would call upon a new Lord's memory, and the battle would continue. If there was one benefit, it was that it could only call upon one memory at a time. I had already gone through reenactments of my struggle with Yorm, the Abyss Watchers, and Aldritch. I suspected it followed a set pattern, reaching back further and further.

I parried one of its thrusts, impaling its face upon my white blade.

It lept away to reform, and I took the opportunity to down my last Estus flask. We had been fighting for hours. I hadn't died yet, but I probably would if this continued for long.

Fortunately, the end was in sight.

"Oh, you son of a bitch," I cursed. Lava gathered in my palm as the Soul of Cinder's armour shifted to the Elite Knight Set, and a familiar Black Knight Halberd formed in its hands. "Joke's on you, you cum-guzzling fuck-tard."

I launched the chaos flame at the Soul's head. It battered it away with MY halberd but left itself open from below. I bashed my shield upwards, knocking the weapon from its hand. I had left my own behind, so I grabbed the burning blade from the air, spun it, and impaled it into the Soul of Cinder's groin. I jumped away, returning to my Irithyl sword.

"Ha!" I shouted, raising my middle finger at the burning bastard. "Back then, I sucked at keeping track of people below my eye line." The Soul let loose another wordless roar, releasing another enormous fire blast signifying a shift.

I had been expecting this one from the start.

A great sword in one hand, the other empty but crackling with lightning. Flames wrapped around his head like a crown. No longer a hollow imitation.

As he was when he first entered the Kiln, Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, stood before me.

"You've caused me a lot of grief, you bastard. But that's fine," I dodged a bolt of lightning the size of my torso. "I'm going to take it out of your ass."

******

“Well done, my Lord of Hollows,” Yuria said as I rose from usurping the Fire. It burned in my chest, my Darksign pulsing in an unfamiliar way but radiated contentment and power.

“Thanks,” I said simply. I had half hoped to be summoned away as soon as I completed the little ritual that ended the Age of Fire. Dozens of hollows had already gathered, only a few of which I recognized.

“What now?” Anri asked. I had gotten her on board with this little ‘age of hollows’ thing by promising her help with Aldridge. While the ‘wedding’ ritual was unpleasant, it had been consensual. Otherwise, I would have told Yuria to take a long walk off a short pier.

I stepped to Anri’s side, whispering in her ear, so we were not overheard.

“If you ever wish to leave it all behind,” I whispered, subtly pressing a homeward bone into her hand. “Use this and touch the painting nearby.”

“My lord?” Yuria asked in worry. I’m sure she was concerned with my odd action. I smiled at her, waving her concerns away as I stepped a bit away from Anri. I couldn’t remember the last time I had gotten the chance to pull a prank like this.

“Can you hold this?” I had pulled the green Sword of Avowal from a side box and presented it to Anri. I had passed my main box on to Yoruichi, but I had kept this one for just this occasion.

“I would rather not,” despite saying so, my ‘wife’ took the hilt I presented to her.

No sooner had she a grip on the hilt than I lunged forward, its green blade angled in such a way to bypass my ribs and get my heart.

“MY LORD!”

I heard voices shout in panic, but I couldn’t pay attention to them. Based on my experience, being impaled in the heart only gave me a few seconds.

“Sorry,” I said through a bloody smile at Anri’s shocked face. The dark sigils flowed out of me and into her.

As did the Flame.

I wouldn’t be around long enough to be a good lord, but Anri could give it a go if she wanted. I did not know if this Age of Hollows would be a good thing or a bad one, but it deserved the chance to grow.

As hands pulled me from the blade, the familiar darkness of death welcomed me.

Would this finally be my last breath?

It had been so long.

******

I gasped, shooting to my feet.

As far as deaths go, that one was gentler than most. Reformation, though, was always a shock to the system. Going from no sensation to feeling everything was disorienting in the extreme. More than that, I was getting much more sensory feedback than I was used to.

That was good. It meant my body was no longer undead. I was tempted to revel in it for a moment, but centuries of combat taught me the importance of time and place.

I looked around, not recognizing my new surroundings.

I was in some sort of chapel. Destroyed furniture littered the ground, spider webs covered the walls, and nature crept up through the floorboards. I was naked because of course I was, but a handy corpse was nearby.

I hoped whatever killed the woman wasn't still around. The cloth didn't fit me, but I was able to repurpose it by tearing the sleaves off and fashioning a loincloth from the dress. Better than nothing. The only thing she had in her pocket was a discoloured finger.

This wasn't how either Demon's Souls, Sekiro or Bloodborne started. But I was hopeful. Who knew what led beyond that door?

Pushing the old wood away, one thing grabbed my eyes instantly. It wasn't the storm clouds in the sky, the ruins around me, or the massive castle in the distant fog.

My eyesight was dominated by the gargantuan golden tree that filled the horizon. I collapsed to my knees as I recognized it from the trailers. Despair filled me as laughter bubbled out of my mouth. I couldn't help the curse that escaped me as my laughter entered the bounds of hysterics.

Elden Ring was the one Fromsoft game I never got to play.

"Well, I'm fucked."

Author's Note:

I'm releasing this extra long chapter as an early birthday present to myself. I thought about splitting it but since it marks the end of part 3 and the beginning of part 4 (the last part of Volume 1) I decided to leave it at that. We'll be leaving the Island women for a bit, though I will go back to their perspectives eventually but the next part of the story can only be told from Mikael's perspective. I had originally not used it before because it didn't add anything to it. Most of us are very familiar with Dark Souls so rehashing the same story would just pad out an already long volume. I'm really excited about what's to come.

First of all; Spoilers!!! I understand that a number of you haven't played Elden Ring. I won't be going supper deep into the LORE of the game, I simply cannot justify padding this part any more than I already will. I will however spoil one of the endings and a good number of the quest lines and some great boss fights. I recommend, if you don't want to be spoiled to pause this fic until you play the game. It is worth it to go in blind.

On that subject, the second thing I need to mention is Mikael. Since he is based on me, as a psudeo self-insert, I will be basing his journey off my own first play through of the game. That means he knows nothing of the network tests, has never seen the intro cutscene, and doesn't have access to all the lore that has been accumulated over the last few months. The only thing he is aware of is the trailers released by Fromsoft prior to release. For reference :This minus the launch trailer. Because of this, he is going to get things wrong and make decisions off wrong conclusions.

The final thing I should talk about is the real world stuff. Since I have a job again, two full chapters a week isn't something I can guarantee anymore. I can either go back to two half chapters a week or one full chapter per week. I've decided to go with the latter. Going forward, expect a full chapter every Friday. The good news it that most of the chapters will be longer, so you can look forward to that. If I get a chance to write more, I'll release chapters early but Fridays are the guaranteed day. Part 4 is going to be the last part of Volume 1 and if I release a chapter every Friday I expect it the last chapter to release on September 2 at the latest. It should round out the volume in the ballpark of 120k~ or so words over the course of 3 months.

Thats all I'll say for now.

PS:

Here they are for those curious about the 'happy endings' he gave in DS1.

Rescued Solair and helped him complete his quest in his world.

Saved Dusk (DLC included)

Dragged Laurentius to Quelana personally.

With Laurentius' aid, dragged Quelana to her sisters so Mikael could 'save' all three.

Followed Rhea to save her from Petrus and Patches.

Kicked Lautrec off a cliff

Tricked Seigward into 'saving' Mikael, so he didn't feel useless.

Brought Seigland to her father before he went hollow.

Reunited Ciaran and Hawkeye and gave them Artoria's soul.

Snuck by Sif to get the ring without killing him (using the spells taught by Dusk)

He didn't kill Gwyndolin, thus didn't kill the knightess. The illusion was never broken.

The only one he couldn't 'save' was Oscar, who had long gone hollow by the time he got out of the cell.

Desolation

DESOLATION I

Set fire to all your maps,
forget how it's always been.
We're explorers of the heart,
learning to dream again.
The adventure of a lifetime,
with love alone as our guide.
Exotic places beyond imagination —
ones we've longed for deep inside.

"What do you think, Steve? Am I completely fucked or just a little fucked?"

I sat at the Elden Ring equivalent of a bonfire in a dimly lit cave. The small pile of bark was illuminated by a golden glow in shape similar to the humanity sprites of the last series. The only other light was the small remnants of my fire. The cave had been well ventilated enough to allow me to set up a cooking pit for my meal.

"On the one hand, not undead anymore, so; Yay. Being able to eat, sleep, and drink again is great. Fairy feast is proving its weight in gold, buddy, though I imagine you wouldn't care. Wild Talent is also a lifesaver. I've done some survival camping before, but never in such a hostile environment."

After my rebirth and discovery of my new predicament, it had taken some time to get out of my funk. I eventually explored the area where I had appeared. I had been on a shrine on top of a cliff in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere. As a Soulsborne game, I was naturally ambushed by a two-meter-tall spider made out of bodies, limbs, death, and hatred. The thing had probably come from the massive castle nearby, maybe washed ashore from the ocean.

I will be avoiding that place for a while yet.

"On the other hand, Steve, pain is much more real now. I have always felt it before, but it was a distant thing. Like I was on low-grade pain killers. Now, nothing is muting it. Also, I get hungry and tired and thirsty, and I forgot how much it sucks having to go to the bathroom all the time."

After managing to kill Jerry, Frankenstein extraordinaire, by the skin of my teeth, I looted its sword and shield. Better equipped, I set off on a further exploration of my new locale.

I then died as the cliff crumbled under me, casting me down into the ocean. The impact of the fall was enough to shatter my new, unenhanced form. I thankfully awoke near my new weapons, the waves washing me to shore in a cave below some sort of grave.

“On the upside again, the scenery is spectacular. I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed travelling. I always had to watch for a random undead or something to stab me in the back. The wild animals are a pain,” I patted the carcass of one of the wolves that had made this cave their home, “but they are wild. They aren’t out to get me in particular. I just looked tasty. ’s only fair that I get to eat them in return, though they were a bit gamey.”

Climbing out of my grave, I was met with some white masked fellow. The vibes I was getting from him were shifty as fuck. He was covered in blood, was waiting for me, and knew I was ‘maidenless’. (Coincidently, I woke up near a dead maiden, gee I wonder if there’s a connection here, Miyazaki!) I got what information I could and hightailed it out of there.

“Back down we go, Steve. Without a maiden of some sort, I cannot learn how to channel Runes.” I could feel the power within me, just out of reach. I had accumulated quite a number over the last month, though I lost a good chunk due to my death. “I also don’t know if this is how the game is supposed to start. Will I get that horse? I will need something if I want to finish this within the next century.”

I explored for a few hours after that, vaguely heading toward the ocean. There had been a ruined building far in the distance, but I had noticed some knight guarding it. He didn’t look like someone I wanted to tangle with without some good armour and a spell or five.

“Also, on the downside, I need to get to someplace called ‘Roundtable’? Very Camelot-sounding place. I’m sure it isn’t shady in the least. At least Artoria will get a kick out of it. But she’s months away,” I paused, trying to gather old memories. “I think. Without my notes, it is hard to tell. Whoever is summoned tomorrow should be able to answer at least that. You’ll like them, Steve. They’re all gorgeous. Though some of them are real headcases.”

I managed to find the ocean, the easy part, but I hadn’t found any new information. The occasional wild animal had been my only encounter. I had laughed myself silly the first time I saw those sheep roll like Sonic. The ram of the wild herd took the opportunity to ram (ha) me, but I got my revenge.

He was delicious.

“Also, also, on the downside is that massive fuck-off castle nearby. That Varre was a bit of a cunt, but at least he told me about the nearby demi-god. I don’t know about you, Steve, but someone called the ‘Grafted’ sounds like the type of person to make a spider out of human limbs and suffering. Not going anywhere near that place for a while. I’m immortal, but dying still hurts, and I do not want to be one of the ingredients in a spider

hot pot."

Unfortunately, my journey along the coast ended with my second death. Maybe Miyazaki got infected with the tentacle bug that seemed to infect everyone in Japan. Perhaps it was a Bloodborne holdover. There was no other reason for something like that land octopus to exist. I killed a dozen little ones and one of the larger forms before the tentacles of two more big ones got me. I felt like a Japanese school girl for a bit. Thankfully they killed me pretty quickly.

I had never been so happy to die.

"Also, on the downside, cubed." I blinked, realizing what I had just said and apologized. "I'm sorry, Steve, that was a math joke you couldn't get. Like everything else here, you originally were only two-dimensional. Can you forgive my insensitivity? You can? Great!" I giggled to myself a little but continued to vent.

"Anyway, and this is the real kick in the pants here. What can I trust now? If I had been summoned to Demons' Souls or Bloodborne, I could see it as a continuation of the 'Soulsborne' option I chose. But Elden Ring hadn't even been released yet. So that leads to some questions; Will I ever be released? Do I need to fulfill some sort of requirement? Or will I go through Fromsoft games, even those released later until the end of time?"

I thankfully respawned at the site of Grace. I had been worried about being mortal for a moment. I also still had my weapons and what clothes I had scrounged up. Unfortunately, the last site of Grace had been outside the grave I had washed up at. Varre was absent, but I decided to avoid the beaches for a while. Instead, I set off northwards. I continued avoiding that big guy on a horse because fuck that noise.

I found my way to the cliffside after a few days of travel. I found a grove and this cave nearby. I then killed the wolves that called it home and found Steve.

I didn't quite know what Steve was, besides being my new best friend and a great listener, but I suspected he had been sapient. He had wielded a weapon for one and wore clothes. On the other hand, he looked like someone partially skinned a hyena and forced it to walk on two legs.

I'll just call him a beastman for now.

Of more interest was the cave itself. While it had been littered with animal and man bones, it also bore signs of more recent habitation. There were bodies of soldiers, still clad in their armour and relatively fresh. Barrels and boxes of supplies were present, as were the smouldering remnants of fires.

From what I could piece together, these guys were soldiers of one of the Demi-gods. They all wore the same uniform, and the heraldry was still intact, so they weren't deserters. The soldiers had been using this cave system as a base. Maybe as a resupply

station, maybe to spy on the castle if they were a foreign force. Then Steve came along with his wolf pack. They killed everyone, ate a few, and then I wandered in and did the same to them.

A real dog-eat-dog world.

Puns aside, this had some implications. First of all, a standardized uniform and heraldry were signs of civilization and sanity. You couldn't take care of your arms and armour if you were mad. This meant there was organization, coordination, and oversight. This, in turn, meant extensive resources, supply lines and infrastructure. All good things for the health of a country.

The problem was that one of my most significant advantages during my time in Dark Souls had been that I kept my sanity, and others did not. They moved by instinct and habit, which I could exploit. I couldn't count on my enemies here doing the same. Unless I was willing to suborn myself to a higher power, which I wasn't, then I would be opposing a country mobilized for war by myself.

From what I remembered of the trailers of Elden Ring? I would be facing numerous countries too. There were multiple demi-god children, and I should probably count on each of them having a faction of some sort to help them become Elden Lord. Either that or they were so badass that they didn't need a faction to be a viable threat to the others.

"You know Steve," I asked rhetorically. "I think I am wholly fucked after all. But let's break it down to a problem I can solve first. Let's try and find this Roundtable Hold. Maybe someone there can teach me how to turn these Runes into strength. That a good first step?" Silence. "Thanks, I thought so too. Good talking to you, Steve. This has been the best conversation I've had in weeks. I'm going to hit the hay. 'Night."

I lay on the bed mat covered in a mound of wolf furs that was my bed for the evening. With a roof over my head, traps at the entrance, and a warm fire beside me, this was the most relaxed I'd been since coming to the Lands Between.

I was offloading my problems on Tomorrow Me, but he could handle it. I trusted him.

Not like Past Me. That guy always screwed me over.

I fell asleep pretty quickly, all things considered. I had a lot of Z time saved after all. My weapon and armour were close at hand, but I wasn't worried about an ambush due to the defences I put up. My only source of disquiet was that Steve wouldn't stop staring.

Even that didn't keep me up too long, and I eventually entered Morpheus' arms under the vacant stare of the dead beastman.

******

Melina sighed to herself as she watched the tarnished converse with the air.

“All I know is that something called the Elden Ring was broken, which led to a war for its remnants or some such.” The man paused as if listening to the other side of a conversation. After a few seconds, he continued. “I don’t know if it’s an actual ring, a location, a person, or some sort of great Rune. That’s the soul equivalent here, by the way. Runes. Everybody has them, and everybody wants them. Only I can’t use them as power. I’m apparently ‘maidenless’ or something.”

She had remained astralized with Torrent for the last month, content to evaluate this new arrival in the lands before committing to an accord. Torrent was very favourable to the man, but Melina would rather have some assurance that the tarnished was capable at the least.

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” The warrior deadpanned. “Your lips aren’t moving, but I can tell when you’re laughing, Raven. I can appreciate the irony, yes. An ocean of women around me but nothing to drink. Attractive women throw themselves at my feet, but I am eternally maidenless. Feel free to tell the others. I’m sure Yoruichi will get a kick out of it if no one else does.”

He had seemed so promisingly too.

A capable warrior and one of good discernment if his treatment of Varre was anything to go off of.

The following weeks also showed favourable results. Though he headed not to Stormveil, he demonstrated good woodcraft knowledge. Too often, soldiers and fighters could only function when they did not have a host of followers to help them with the lesser tasks. His self-sufficiency was laudable. Even his recent death to the land octopi was not a demerit in Melina’s eye. They were an odd creature only found on the shores of the Lands Between. The tarnished’s quick recuperation was more impressive than anything else.

“Anyway, back to the problem at hand. I have no idea how long this is going to take. You could all be on the Island for months, if not years. Elden Ring was supposed to be their largest game ever and, from what I remember of the trailers, take place over countries. It is essentially about various demi-god kings throwing their forces at each other to see who can be the new god.” Melina’s prospective champion summarized the current situation succinctly if a bit simply.

But as the weeks progressed, the man’s idiosyncrasies started to be more and more apparent. He was lonely. That was plain. He alleviated his loneliness with song sometimes. (Melina would never admit to falling from Torrent’s spectral back in awe the first time she heard him sing) But sometimes, the man would talk to himself. That wasn’t an issue, per

se, but the topics were worrisome.

“I’ll need a mount for sure, just due to the distances. Thankfully, I have some horse experience, and Wild Talent should cover the rest. Of more concern is the lack of knowledge. I could only finish the other games so quickly because I generally knew what I was supposed to do. Even if the world was bigger than expected, I knew which steps to take. I’m flying blind here. My best guess is to walk up to the foot of the giant golden tree and proclaim myself God-king.”

The tarnished used terms such as 2-dee, level-design, NPC, and others that Melina did not recognize, though some she could intuit. The tarnished kept referring to the Lands Between as a game of some sort. All tarnished were a bit off, but this one seemed even more touched in the head than most. More concerning were his religious beliefs.

Melina had never heard of a Deity called ‘Miyazaki’, but it must be a vengeful and terrible one judging by the man’s cursing.

“The castle, Stormveil, I heard it called, might be an excellent first stop for information if nothing else. The only problem is the well-armed and coordinated army in a fortified position between me and it. I would take those odds with a good weapon, some planning, my spells and pyromancies, and some good old-fashioned sabotage. But I can’t get any stronger without a ‘maiden’ or until someone teaches me how to channel these Runes into power.”

The tarnished’s odd behaviour reached a tipping point last night. His fighting ability was undiminished as he slew the pack of wolves and the Azula Beastman that led them. But then he spent hours talking to the corpse, calling it Steve (what a peculiar name) and acting as if it responded.

It was a testament to Melina’s desperation that she did not abandon the tarnished right then.

“I’m going to keep bumming around this area for a bit, maybe do my best bandit impersonation while I try and gather some information. A map, if nothing else. I really do not want to fuck myself over by doing something stupid when I don’t know up from down. I’m sure I can find a military outpost or camp nearby. These guys had to come from somewhere, and I might be able to use their uniform to sneak in by posing as a lone survivor.”

This morning Melina was almost ready to abandon the man altogether, Torrent’s recommendation be damned, when he started talking to thin air. Only two things stayed on her feet. First of all, Torrent refused to leave. No matter how the kindling maiden prodded or cajoled him, he would not leave this tarnished’s side.

The second reason was that Melina was really that desperate.

She had been waiting centuries while Queen Marika's children vied for the Elden Ring for a tarnished worthy of becoming Elden Lord. She had considered throwing in her lot with the Deathbed Companion, Sir Gedeon, or even the Ever Brilliant Goldmask. But those tarnished did not need her. They had their own factions and backing, their own maidens. All Melina could offer was a simple service of channelling Runes and Torrent's whistle.

So the woman was stuck with this mad man.

Where else would she find a tarnished still blessed by Grace, who lacked a Maiden and wasn't part of any existing faction?

So Melina stuck around, watching the crazy tarnished talk to his imaginary friend for hours. At one point, they left the cave system, and the woman followed as he pointed out the Erd Tree, the nearby grove, and Stormveil, barely visible in the distance. She barely paid half a mind to his mad ramblings about an island, other women, and seals of some sort.

"And this is Steve," the tarnished said grandly, gesturing to the fly-ridden corpse of the beastman. "I'm sure there are many more like him, but this one is mine. He is my oldest friend. We go way back. It seems like only yesterday we first met." He paused again, listing to the fictitious woman. "I have no idea. I was hoping one of you ladies could tell me. Maybe have Tsunade do an autopsy or something. I have another bag of goodies too." He gestured to a crude sack made from animal hide filled with odds and ends he had found. "Some examples of the local flora and fauna. Some odd items I found in this cave that the soldiers had in supply. Whatever you can tell me about them would be good."

Melina was ready to tune the one-sided conversation out again when the tarnished got a surprised look on his face. For a moment, he looked lost and confused, then focused. As if he had been presented with an unexpected question, he sat for a moment in serious contemplation.

"I suppose I am in a good mood," he said. He sounded surprised, though he smiled. "I guess I am just excited, is all." Whatever his imaginary companion said next seemed to take some of the levity out of his face. "I will never stop! Not till I'm free!" He suddenly snarled in anger. Despite being immaterial and invisible, Melina took a step away from the sudden show of rage. It was only for a moment, then the tarnished calmed again.

"Sorry, Raven," he sounded sorry but at the same time defiant. "You just pushed a raw button there. For a moment, I thought I was free. I had killed the Soul of Cinder, and I was alive. I thought I had achieved my dream. That I could put all the bad times behind me. Then I saw the tree, and it came crashing down again." He listened for a long moment, almost an entire minute, before speaking again.

"I suppose I am happy because this is the first time I can look forward to an

adventure. Don't get me wrong, I am sure it will suck a good portion of the time. I have no idea where to go. I'm facing down against multiple countries and gods. I also have no guarantee that I will ever get stronger than I am now. Despite all that, I am excited.

"Dark Souls was a duty I had to fulfill. I learned a lot and made some excellent memories, even if they were few and far between, but I never looked forward to anything beyond getting it over with. That's because I knew everything that was standing between my Freedom and me. I had done it all before, even if it was only a game. There was nothing new. Now, I look at the horizon and have no clue what lays beyond it. This new journey could take me another fifty years, or even a hundred, but it is just that. New. My Freedom is important, but it was always meant to be a tool to facilitate adventure."

There was a moment of silence before the tarnished smiled sardonically. "Besides, if I know Miyazaki, I'll be facing down six poisonous swamps, abominations from beyond time and space, crippling heartbreak, and more deaths than a World War. I'm sure I'll be thrown against the biggest badasses of this world too. I can't guarantee a happy ending for anyone, not even myself. That's exciting in its own way, isn't it? If I remember correctly, Artoria once told me I had achieved the Throne of Heroes thrice over. I never felt like it. I was going through the motions. With the Talents and a guarantee of never going hollow? Given enough time, I literally could never fail. Now? One man against armies, countries, demi-gods, gods, and who knows what else? No guarantee of success? That sounds like a Legend worth telling."

Melina felt something at his words.

This tarnished was clearly deluded, mad, and more than a little crazy. But for that instant, she believed she was standing in front of someone worthy of the title of Lord.

Then he tossed the beastman carcass and the full sack into the air for no reason.

They both disappeared as if passing through an invisible door.

For a moment, the kindling maiden stood there blinking in disbelief before Torrent bumped his head against her shoulder. She turned to the spectral steed and whispered to her companion furiously. Her face was flushed in embarrassment though she was still imperceivable to the tarnished's eyes.

"So he is not completely mad, that doesn't mean you are right!"

******

"Greetings. Traveller from beyond the fog. I am Melina. I offer you an accord."

"Jesus!" The tarnished jumped from his seat beside the site of Grace in surprise at her appearance. He had taken refuge for the night in the camp of Godrick's soldiers after

slaying all who had inhabited it. She chose, in a moment of whimsy, to appear behind him. “Where did you come from, lady?”

“Forgive me. I’ve been… following you. To see whether or not Grace truly does guide you.” Among other things. She had prepared this script ages ago and wouldn’t let this half-mad tarnished ruin it. “And…whether you are fit to face the challenge that entails. It seems my worries were unfounded.”

“You’ve been following me?” He asked slowly. “For how long?”

“Since finding you washed up in the caves under the hero’s grave.”

“So you’ve been following me for three months? And you’ve seen everything?” He clearly looked amused at the idea. Melina flushed.

“Yes! And you should be ashamed of yourself!”

The tarnished laughed at her embarrassment.

That set the tone for their decades-long relationship.

******

When I reflect on my time in the Lands Between, with all its wonder and the heartbreak, I feel like I can separate it into four broad periods. While the later parts were tinged by the tragedies I had come to expect in Fromsoft games, I remember that first decade as some of the happiest times of my life.

I mostly stuck around Limgrave and the Weeping Peninsula, avoiding Stormveil and its Demi-god.

Torrent was a godsend and a half. He was the best boi, hands down. (He was, yes he was. Robin agreed. She was so jealous when they met, and she couldn’t pet him.) A horse as immortal as myself was necessary when Limgrave was the size of Germany alone.

Melina told me that other countries and challenges existed between the Erd Tree and me, but I put that terrible thought aside to enjoy the adventure. As expected of Fromsoft, the Lands Between was full of interesting characters.

******

“A pleasure to meet thee, Tarnished. I am the witch Renna. I’d heard tell of a Tarnished hurtling about atop a spectral steed. And upon looking into the matter, the talk, I surmise, is of thee. Thou’rt possessed of the power, no? To call forth the spectral steed named Torrent.” The blue, four-armed, doll-like woman asked.

“I shall tolerate no insult, though you be a fair maiden,” I said in my most pompous,

medieval-age knight voice. "You shall address him by his full title. He is Torrent, First of His Name! Goodest of Bois! Steed of the Spectral Step! Mount of the Third Elden Lord!"

"That is…" the woman with two faces blinked at me in disbelief, "quite a claim."

"Eh," I shrugged in my normal voice. "We're workshopping it. Torrent wanted to add 'The Holiest of Hornies', but I talked him down from it. Not only does he not understand the implication, but I think three titles is the most I can give without it being too cumbersome."

She giggled behind one of her four hands.

Melina facepalmed.

******

"Boc the Seamster, at your service. Ready to make adjustments to your garments." The short, monkey-like creature in a roughspun tunic and hat said.

"You mean you can patch up all these holes, make things fit and make underwear!?" I couldn't help but shout out in happy surprise, hugging the little creature. I knew the basics of sewing and tailoring more than the average person, but I hated it passionately. "You are now my bro! Never leave me!"

Melina facepalmed.

******

"I thank you for killing that Tree Sentinal. He was terrible for business. I am Kale, a nomadic merchant. You are a Tarnished, I can see it. And I can also see that you're not after my throat. Then why not purchase a little something?" He looked like a scarecrow Santa. That wasn't important. What was important was the odd instrument in his hands and the song he was playing. I would know that theme anywhere.

"I ham strung his horse then stabbed him through the eye holes when he fell. More importantly, I'll give you all the Runes he had if you can get me one of those instruments and teach me how to play. Singing can only get one so far."

I didn't need to see her to know Melina perked up at the idea.

******

"Well, you are a piece of work. Very well. You are now my protégé in glintstone sorcery. But I refuse to coddle. Or cast kind words. Never. Anticipate grievances, young apprentice."

"Help me, Sellen-sensei," I said, "you're my only hope."

"My apprentice, what does sensei mean?"

Melina facepalmed.

******

"I can cross space and time, live for tens of thousands of years, and see the end of the world, but I will never escape you, can I?" I asked the man rhetorically, a fondness in my voice.

"Have we met?" The newest iteration of Patches asked me as he tried to impale me through the chest with his spear.

******

"Who goes there? Kalé sent you, did he? Ever the bloody busybody. Hmm. Maybe to him, you don't seem so strange. The name's Blaidd." The man-wolf in cool armour said after jumping from the top of a ruined building. "I'm looking for a man who goes by "Darriwil." He fled somewhere nearby. Or so I've heard. Come tell me if you find him before I do. I can offer you ample reward. Darriwil is nothing but a traitor. And in need of a fitting end to his tale."

"I will help you on your quest Blaidd," I responded seriously as I looked at his cape in envy. "Traitors are scum and villains, no matter their intent. I would ask only one thing of you in return. We must become the Bestest of Bros."

Melina facepalmed.

******

"Once again, the pleasure is mine. I am the warrior jar known as Alexander. Iron Fist Alexander, in fact. I journey to the east, where I intend to further my education in the ways of war. Beyond these lands lie the scarlet rot-blighted Caelid Wilds. And upon their southern edge is Redmane Castle, in which a festival of combat is to be held. I'd heard whispers of such festivities before… Doesn't the notion set your breast aflutter!"

"It certainly does, my jar-shaped friend," I said, staring up at the two-meter-tall walking jar with arms. I was getting major Siegmeyer vibes from the guy, and the Onion Knights were always top of my list of 'good people'. "Though I admit, your existence does put me in something of a quandary."

"Though I am bound eastward, the festival is not to be held for years hence. My calculations predict plenty of time. How may I be of assistance, my fellow warrior?"

"It is nothing too serious. I am just posing the eternal question. Something all men must ask themselves at least once in their life. Is Jar-buddy or Wolf-buddy more 'Bro'."

Melina facepalmed.

******

Of course, the Roundtable Hold was as full of shifty characters as I expected. I mostly stayed clear of it until I could have Emma come in and verify a few things for me.

******

"The blind priest is precisely as he appears. He worships the Golden Order and would be against any who go against it." Emma reported. It was six months or so since I had appeared in the Lands Between, and I had kept my distance from Roundtable till now. Though nobody could see or hear her, I let loose my control over my thoughts to communicate with her mentally. We were resting in one of the corners of the hold. "Diallos and D aren't hiding anything either. One wants to find his missing servant and prove himself, and the other hunts 'those who live in death'. The girl, Roderika, is also as simple as she appears. A girl who is in over her head and lost all her companions."

"At least some people are straightforward, though that probably means they are doomed." I 'said'. "What about the rest?"

"They all have some angle to play here." Emma had perked up when I had asked her for help with this task. I was starting to wonder if she got off on the voyeuristic aspects of her power. What am I thinking? Of course, she did. "The woman, Fia, serves the Demi-god whose death kicked all this off. Godwyn, Prince of Death, she calls him in her mind. They lead 'those who live in death'."

"Is he undead or something else?"

"From what I gathered, only his spirit was killed in the 'Night of Black Knives'. His body still lives and spreads its influence through a root network. She is seeking out a 'Cursemark of Death' to create a Great Rune. She doesn't care who is Elden Lord so long as they use that Rune to repair the Elden Ring. Her blessing is valid; it strengthens the receiver and sucks some of their vitality as payment. Also, a shadow of anyone who accepts it can be called by her to fight."

"I'll put her faction in the maybe pile. If they don't care if I become Elden Lord instead of Godwyn, then we might be able to work together. I'm just iffy about being undead again if that's what it takes."

"Next, we have Gideon Ofnir, the All-Knowing. He is the trickiest opponent here. I would rate him as a Sebastion Shaw-type character, only more cautious," Emma said seriously. "His title isn't just for show. He has a wealth of knowledge in his head, which we can go over later,

and he has spies everywhere. His backup plans have backup plans. He has very few overt supporters, that silent fellow that follows him and his adopted daughter, but an almost endless supply of hidden resources to draw upon. Unless something changes, you can count on him to help you along the journey if you can prove yourself useful. He will never allow another tarnished to be Elden Lord. Like all his faction, he will use you until it is time to discard you."

"So the sudden and inevitable betrayal will be sudden and inevitable. Got it. I'll need to keep him around for you to probe. What of the blacksmith chained to the wall."

"Hewg is…" the mutant bit her lip in consideration for her words. I noted her lipstick was a rather excellent shade of ice blue that complimented her eyes and pale skin. "His mind is not entirely his own. Marika, the goddess of this world, has compelled him to create a god-slaying weapon. Even if I could actually work with the minds there, rather than just observe, I wouldn't be able to free him. It is so deeply ingrained into his being that he lives and breathes that purpose. He doesn't care who wins or losses this war, so long as he makes that weapon."

"So either Marika the Eternal has a death wish, or deeper currents exist here. Other gods, perhaps?" I asked myself thoughtfully.

"Probably," Emma nodded. "Not even the stupidest villains make a weapon designed to kill them. It's a safe bet that other gods prowl the land, and Marika shattered the Elden Ring either to keep it out of their hands or for a similar purpose. But Hewg isn't the only mind here tampered with."

I sent over a mental inquiry, urging her to explain.

"Beyond the main door lies one of the Two-Fingers." Emma pointed towards the other side of the Hold. "Gideon knew that, but I can also tell you there is a Finger Maiden with them. Her mind is… twisted. Warped. It's like someone took a copy-paste of a mind, one already bent in an alien direction, and slapped it into a new body. The Two Fingers themselves are completely Alien. Not inhuman, just something that operates on a different level. I can feel a mind there, but it is beyond my comprehension."

"Shit!" I swore mentally. Only my effort to be subtle stopped me from getting up and pacing. "I guess this world is closer to Bloodborne than I hoped. The way you described it, they sound very Goo-ish." At the White Queen's uncomprehending look, I explained. "Great Old One. Cthulhu mythos type stuff. Beings greater than human comprehension twist people into madness with their mere presence."

"Whatever they are, it might be why Marika wanted a weapon that could kill gods."

******

I also made some wise decisions during that time.

******

“Would you mind taking a letter to my father at the castle? My sole wish is that he escapes, even if his honour should be the price. Please… I just want him to be safe…”

“You want me to deliver a letter,” I asked incredulously at the blind woman sitting in a field of corpses. “While you sit here? In the open? With no one to protect you? From those who you just admitted tried to kill you?”

Irina blushed in shame.

I could recognize a Soulsborne tragedy in the making when I saw one.

I wasn’t stupid.

“You can stay at Roundtable Hold while I go knock some sense into your father,” I said with finality. I then ignored her protests and squirming when I put her on Torrent.

I had always wanted to kidnap some damsel in distress.

Melina facepalmed.

******

“Ah, yes. I’ve been meaning to ask. Would you like to enter my service? I see bright things in your future, stout warrior. Enter into my service and learn the workings of the Erdtree’s true Order. And who knows, perhaps some time down the line, the Grace of gold will return to those Tarnished eyes of yours. What say you? A fine accord, is it not?”

Kenneth, the noble whose castle I just liberated, asked pompously. He was straight out of Shakespeare. I didn’t need Melina appearing behind the man, frantically gesturing in the negative to refuse. Though her efforts were appreciated.

I later asked her why she was so set against it.

“I care not how thy journey leads, so long as it leads to the foot of the Erd Tree, such is our accord,” she said seriously. “But if I had to put up with that windbag for one more moment, I would have slain him myself.”

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Of course, it wasn’t all wacky side characters, deep plots, and good times. I died more than my fair share of horrific deaths.

******

“Your telling me a dragon uses that shallow lake as a hunting ground?” I asked Yura. “And some of the tarnished worship it?”

“It’s as fearsome as it is majestic. So, unless you’re mad, or wish to be burned alive… Stay clear of the lake,” he warned.

Unfortunately, I was indeed mad.

“LEEEERRRROOOYYYYY JEEEEEEENNNNKIIIINNNNNSSSSS!” I shouted my warcry as I charged through the flames.

I died twelve times to the thing, then I got fed up and rode off on Torrent. I would be back for that bastard. As soon as I found a way to attack an airborne dragon that didn’t involve arrows harmlessly bouncing off its scales. I either needed a proper bow and enchanted arrows or some spells.

I never thought I would miss the drakes of dark souls.

******

“Blarg,” I coughed up blood.

The ballista bolt pinning me to the cliff through my torso did not make it easy. I missed it when my enemies did not take defensive positions and fortify them. Who knew putting ranged defences on critical locations such as bridges could prove so effective in stopping would-be travellers or invaders.

Oh, wait, anyone with common sense knew that.

I missed it when I was the only armed man in a battle of wits.

******

“Run Torrent,” I urged the best boi on. They were gaining on us.

“Rarrr,” the bear, the size of a house, roared from right behind us. Torrent neighed in fear.

So quickly were we rushing through the forest that we didn’t notice the other furry monster the size of an eighteen-wheeler side swipe us as we passed by. We fell in a bloody and mangled tangle of flesh, Torrent astralizing as soon as I was off.

The bears ate well that night.

I hate those fucking things!

******

“Oh, come on!” I complained to no one as the knight, armoured like a tank, grew spectral draconic wings. “That’s so unfair.”

A small part of me couldn’t help but think these gaols were a bit dangerous.

A much more significant part of me was thinking about how to learn that spell.

It was good that I had something to occupy my mind, as the pain of a bisection was not something I liked to ponder.

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And then there was Caelid.

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“Why Miyasaki?” I yelled in anger as I ran through the cave. “Why are teleporting traps a thing?”

The insect people inundated the hallway with their arrow-like projectiles. The diggers tried to impale me with their magic drills.

I nearly cried when I repeatedly respawned in the ramshackle house in the mine and died over six more times. I had to sneak my way out of the cave.

Then I saw the crimson skies and demon bird/dog/t-rex monstrosities. I smelled the foul air, felt my flesh melting from the red pus, and saw the poisonous swamp in the distance.

I returned to the cave.

******

We don’t talk about Caelid!

Apart from a few particularly blighted memories, I can confidently say that my first decade in Elden Ring was some of the best times I’ve had in my centuries of life. There were three reasons why so;

At its most basic, it was a time when my worries were low. Unlike games I was familiar with, there was nothing extra I could be doing that I knew about. I could forget about the Island, and its prisoners, for a time. Never wholly, the foreign influence in my mind ensured that, but they ceased to be in my every waking thought. I stopped feeling like a prisoner for a time and could just be Mikael.

The second reason was that I was on a new adventure, never knowing what was to come or where to go. It was exciting in a way that was new to me.

And most importantly, I was never alone.

Torrent and Melina were with me the entire time.

Author's Note:

This marks the start of the last part of Volume 1.

With my new job, my schedule is shrunk to one chapter every Friday. Though you can expect them to be about this long or so. I'll see you all next week.

DESOLATION II

“Have ever you heard of the Land of Beyond,
That dreams at the gates of the day?
Alluring it lies at the skirts of the skies,
And ever so far away;
Alluring it calls: O ye the yoke galls,
And ye of the trails overfond,
With saddle and pack, by paddle and track,
Let’s go to the Land of Beyond!”

“Whoooooohooooooooo!” I exclaimed in joy, pumping my fist in the air. “Suck a dick, you scally bastard! Who’s the best? We’re the best! Who’s dead? You are! Torrent, your best boi status has been solidified and codified into law.” I pat the Spirit Steed’s head with one hand, rubbing right at the base of his horns, just the way he liked. With my other hand, I fed him some of the raisins he loved.

Before us, crumbling to dust, was the massive remains of Agheel. He had been a drake, not a full dragon, but his stone-like skin had made him an even more formidable challenge than the Hellkite. It was only due to Torrent’s incredible speed and maneuvering that I had been able to slay the creature.

We had kept circling it while on the ground, slicing at it when an opportunity presented itself. The biggest problem had been trying to ground it when it took to the air. The tiny bit of the local sorceries I knew did not penetrate its hide. We journeyed for over a decade before returning to the shallow lake Agheel used as a hunting ground.

It turns out the answer had been nearby all along.

There was a forbidden area in the Hero’s grave I had washed up in. Using one of those stonesword keys, I gained access. I found quite some helpful stuff there, such as a golden seed for my flasks, a few examples of weapon coating, an interesting talisman, and a seal for casting faith-based spells, which would probably go unused. My most significant profit was when I destroyed the automated chariot that patrolled the grave using the explosive material nearby.

Picking through the remains of the chariot, I found a fabulous great bow. Seizing the opportunity, I had Hewg fashion some great arrows and, using my new toys, clipped Agheel’s wings. The rest had been inevitable.

“Well done, Mikael,” Melina said, appearing behind me on Torrent’s back. I knew she never left me. “Very few tarnished can claim the title of Dragonslayer throughout history. Agheel, while not an Ancient Dragon, could still claim descent from them.”

“Thanks,” I was panting from the fight’s exertion and the area’s heat. Agheel’s favourite tactic had been to carpet bomb the lake from up high. His flames would burn anyone present, and the boiling water would take care of most who managed to hide from the initial blast. My spirit summons had been cooked not long after their summoning. “What’s that?” I asked as I claimed the Runes the dragon held.

There were quite a few, but the red lump falling into the shallow water was more interesting. It was ovoid in shape, the size of my head. Riddled with spikes, this grotesque organ continued to beat vivaciously. Even as Melina responded, I knew the answer.

“This is Agheel’s heart, My Tarnished,” she said as I slid off the horse and picked up the thing to get a better look. What I thought to be bone spikes were instead stone. While a terrible and savage-looking thing, the heart had a peculiar beauty to it. “Long ago, Dragon Trackers hunted the flying beasts. Theirs was an arcane practice of Dragon Communion. Unlike the Dragon Cult of the Capital, who sought to work with dragons, the adherents to the Communion sought to transform into them by consuming their hearts in ritualistic locations.”

“Really?” Miyazaki loved dragons, a staple of western and eastern fantasy, and they had been present in every one of the games he directed except Bloodborne. The theme of turning into them was also well-trod, usually with disastrous consequences.

“Indeed,” I could feel her nod even as she tightened her arms around my waist. “You have already discovered one of their churches, on the isle near the coast of Limgrave. The Dragon Communion Seal you found in the Fringefolk Hero’s Grave is also one of theirs. While remnants remain of the practice, the edifice and adherents were wiped out by the dragons themselves. Their Cathedral was in Caelid before the battle of Malania and Radahn destroyed the country. Ekzykes, Dragon Communion Revenger, did not forget his hatred even as he succumbed to the scarlet rot and remains near the ruins to this day.”

“Did it work? The transformation, I mean.” I couldn’t help but ask, threads starting to connect in my head.

“My Tarnished?” Melina asked sharply. “Surely you cannot mean to take part in such a practice? Theirs was a pure and overwhelming power, tis true. However, those who have performed the Dragon Communion will find their humanity slowly slipping away. Once they fully succumb to their fate, they are left no more than wyrms that crawl the earth. The dragon-hearted were heroes of eld, but they fell one by one to the madness.”

“I am as mad as I am going to get,” I said plainly, still staring at the heart in my hand. In its pulsing rhythm, I saw a glimmer of hope. I might have a way to my freedom yet.

“Mikael!” She said seriously, concern in her voice as she looked up at me with worried eyes. “How sure are you that your… situation will protect you from the influence of the

dragons?"

"Completely certain," I responded just as seriously.

I had told Melina a similar abbreviated story to the one I explained to Priscilla so long ago. She knew about the other island women; she'd seen me talking to them and giving them items. I had kept the sheer scope of my situation from her, but the key factors were there. I was cursed to wander until I became Elden Lord. I would not and could not deviate from my course. My curse left my companions trapped, with the occasional visit, and me mad.

I hadn't told any of the other women on the island about Melina for three reasons. First, they could not interact with each other at all, so there would be no point. The second reason was that I did not need any of the drama that could come from their jealousy. If I offered Melina my bite in the future, we could deal with it.

My third, and most petty reason, was simply that I did not want to share. I wasn't compelled to love or even like Melina. Our initial accord was one of convenience. She needed to get to the Erd Tree, and I needed a maiden. Whatever sort of relationship that grew from there was for us alone. I still felt the alien emotion worm itself into me whenever the Island women were summoned, that never diminished, but everything I felt for My Maiden was purely between us.

"If you are completely sure," My Maiden said once she realized my resolution. While she still talked using her native accent, a decade spent with me changed her style and word choice. "If you are not at risk from their corruption, then the opportunity for a great power is there. Several Dragons still inhabit the Lands Between. Long ago, Godwyn the Golden defeated the ancient dragon Fortissax and befriended his fallen foe. While the Demi-god has perished, I haven't heard about the dragon doing the same. Or his sister, Lansseax, who took on human form during the time of the Dragon Cult. Greyoll and her brood still inhabit Dragonbarrow in Caelid. Faram Azula and the north should also be home to a few that remain."

"It sounds like we have a lot of dragons to hunt," I said as I remounted Torrent. I offered her a hand, which she gladly took, and she sat behind me again. "Before we make a list of targets, tell me everything you know about the Communion and those who practiced it. We'll stop at the church you mentioned, but then we'll have to go to Caelid for the Cathedral. I want to see if I can retrieve anything in its remains."

"Very well, then I shall tell you of the ancient troll warrior Theodorix. He was a hero of the War against the Giants…"

******

The death of Agheel marked the end of my fun in the sun.

While there were still many moments of joy to come, great friends to see again, and places to explore, the unburdened wonder of that first decade was never felt again. Looking back on that time, I had behaved almost like a child, where everything was wonderful and full of adventure. Agheel changed things because he gave me the worst gift possible.

Hope.

I had been able to wander across Limgrave in such a carefree manner because, in a way, I was hopeless.

What did it matter if I spent decades or centuries galavanting across the countryside?

I had no guarantee that even if I managed the herculean task of becoming Elden Lord that I wouldn't just be shuffled off to the next word. Maybe a Fromsoft game I knew about, perhaps one that would be released five years after Elden Ring. I was ever urged onwards by Elements, but with no sense of purpose that a familiar game might bring, I was able to calm that urge by simple exploration.

Agheel changed things with his death.

Once a plan started to form in my head, it would not leave.

For once, I would be proactive. I wouldn't trust my fate to whoever or whatever placed me in this situation. I would find my own freedom.

Those thoughts drove me ever onwards through the blighted lands of Caelid.

My time in the rot-infested country was as horrific as one could imagine. The air was chocked full of the red fungus, and breathing was difficult at the best of times. During combat, when my lungs ached with every pump, I died more to the coughing fits than to the monsters that prowled the land.

And what monsters they were.

Mutated and horrific dogs, birds, and people infested those lands. The zombie-like dregs that wandered the roads in hoards were easy to avoid, but the animals were not so considerate. The dogs were shaped like a Tyranasaurous, their front legs shrivelled and misshaped, but their massive size and bulbous head made them even more dangerous. By far, the worst was the birds. Like someone had taken a crow, multiplied its size by a factor of ten, grafted hairy, human legs onto it, and filled it with enough malice to blot out the skies.

The army of the local Demigod, Starscourge Radahn, was a big help. They would still try and kill me if they saw me, but they were much more focused on beating back the blighted monsters of the Aeonian swamp.

In Caelid, if the air didn't kill you, and the monsters didn't kill you, then the Scarlet Rot would kill you.

It permeated the land in puddles, in fungal spores, and in the swampy ground. It accumulated over time through everything you touched or did. If you are unlucky, then you become infected by it. Like supped up necrosis, with a dash of the Mercer-virus. Once infected, you either killed yourself, set yourself alight with fire, or prayed it was only a minor infection.

Only Torrent's immunity to the stuff kept my exploration of Caelid to six years instead of the decades it could have been.

Perhaps the worst part was that Melina spent so little time out of spirit form to reduce the risk of infection that I had to traverse the former country almost entirely alone. Gone were the days we fell asleep under the stars in each other's arms.

Dragons were my main reason for heading to Caelid, but they were relegated to the status of McGuffins to me. I found a Wyrm in one of the mines that connected Caelid to Limgrave. One of the few dragon-hearted not already slain when the Communion fell. Alexander actually gave me a hand with that fight which was nice. The tight confines were not the best for fighting a lava-spewing lizard.

Ekzykes fell to the same tactic as Agheel, my great bow clipping his wings and bleeding him to death upon the ground by a thousand cuts. Greyll met a similar fate when he ambushed me during my exploration of Dragonbarrow.

Elder Dragon Greyoll was a more formidable challenge; despite being so old and large she had fused to the ground. The great beast was simply too big for me to deal any real damage to. She would call her brood to her assistance if I started any real damage. It took me three months to slay the neighbouring drakes, leaving her defenceless, and then carve my way to her heart.

I then learned she had four more I had to reach before she would finally expire.

Needless to say, by the end, I needed an extensive cleaning afterwards. Thankfully, Dragonbarrow had been the last stop of my time in Caelid, and I was pretty happy to return to the idyllic countryside of Limgrave.

Looking back on my time in Caelid is not a pleasant experience, but it was necessary. Not only to reach the Cathedral of Dragon Communion, which was crucial to my plan, but for two encounters that would shape the entire rest of my journey to be free.

******

I rode into the ruined church slowly, wary of any more traps. Rolling boulders were not a

new addition to a Fromsoft game, a staple in fact, but one that changed courses to seek you out was new.

Sellia, Town of Sorcery had been one unpleasant encounter after another. The marionettes were annoying, but the invisible sorcerers had been a problem. I had taken to blanketing the streets and buildings in my Breath, fire purged most of the rot, but I had to be careful not to destroy the buildings and the knowledge they contained. It was a gruelling month of slow progress, but I was looking forward to going over my loot. There were quite a few items of interest and several books on sorcery.

I guessed the 'secret' of the city without effort, though Gowry did point me in the right directions to find the briars I needed to light to take down the spell barriers. The creepy old man had directed me up the hill to this church after repairing a needle found in the swamp. Supposedly, it was to heal a girl afflicted with rot that these shrimp people worshipped.

I called bullshit.

While Elden Ring was not a dead world like Dark Souls, as far as I am aware, it was still a game from the mind of Hidetaka Miyazaki. The man was an out-and-out masochist who enjoyed not only pain but heartbreak. The man would never have a kindly old man caring for a sick girl unless the girl turned into an abomination from beyond mortal kin or the kind old man was a psychopath.

I admired Miyazaki. I found joy in his work. I even liked the bittersweet feelings it could dredge up. The wonder and grandeur, the horror and terror, the nihilism and the exhilaration. Over the years I had played his games, I had grown to trust him to deliver a well-crafted experience, even if it was a kick to the balls.

But I never forgot that we were different people and liked different things. While I enjoyed Soulsborne games, I also enjoyed classic RPGs. I like my OP main characters, my trashy harem fantasy. I enjoyed the tropes of Chinese wuxia, xianxia, and xuanhuan novels. More than anything, I liked wish fulfillment and happy endings. The caveat being that they had to be well written, which they sadly were not most of the time.

Deep in my soul, I knew some sort of tragedy or terrible revelation was waiting for me in the future. Maybe the friends I'd made would die horrifically. Perhaps they would fall into despair. Possibly the final boss would be someone I grew to care about. I had no way to promise anyone a happy ending, not even myself.

So I remained cautious even as I burned the Pests to chitinous slag. I remained cautious as I approached the pitiful girl, curled up and coughing in the corner of a ruined church in a devastated country.

"Ah…Ahh," she moaned in pain to herself as I approached. I dismounted and dissipated Torrent but kept my hand on my weapon. At this range, it would be quicker to impale her on my

Moonveil than to gather one of my Breaths. "Nggh… Who's there?" She asked blearily.

Her hair was scarlet. I don't know why that stuck out to me so much, but it did. Not the orangish-red on most gingers but a deep scarlet red, the same hue as the dried blood on her tunic. The same red of the skies and swamp of Caelid. It was a dishevelled, blotted mess. The type of hair you get when you do not bathe for a long time due to a violent sickness. I had hair like that at one point.

My eyes then fell to the rest of her. She was crumpled into a heap on the ground, writhing in pain. She was thin, almost emaciated and could clearly use a good meal. But of more interest was the absence of her right hand.

"Well, it matters not. If you are wise, you will leave immediately. My flesh writhes with scarlet rot. It is a curse. Not to be meddled with by man." She continued to say as I approached slowly. For a moment, I remembered the trailers for the game. In it, a one-armed, red-headed woman featured prominently. Was this her? Either way, I was here for a reason.

"Sorry for barging in," I smiled at the girl in a disarming way, trying to ease her worry. I was cautious, not heartless. "I just have something for you." I reached into my pouch a received the Gold Needle. "A totally not creepy old man at the bottom of the cliff asked me to give this to you. It is supposed to help with your sickness."

"A… needle?" Millicent asked as she squinted at the object.

"I know, I know," I was careful to not make any sudden moves as I approached. "A creepy stranger walks up to you and asks to stick you with a needle to make you feel good. The proper response is to call for an adult. But I am an adult, and I am just trying to help. I have no idea how this will help. Gowry seems to have your best interest for the moment." I slowly set the needle on her legs and backed away. My hand never strayed far from my sword.

"You ask that I stab myself with the needle… To quell the scarlet rot? But…how?" I was about to reiterate my cluelessness, but she shook her head and sat straighter. She took the gold item in her one remaining hand. "Never mind. I've decided. I would rather trust you than simply continue to spoil from within. Would you mind… averting your eyes for a moment?"

Numbly, I turned away. A part of me wanted to joke about how anorexia wasn't attractive to me. Another part of me realized my hand had fallen from my weapon, and if Millicent attacked while my back was turned, I would be finished.

The most significant part of me was focusing on my beating heart and sweaty palms and asking myself why her words struck me like a truck.

"Well. That was easier than expected." Her voice shook me from my momentary stupor. "But…why do I feel so…" I turned to see her collapse into a dead faint.

I didn't panic, but I did approach. Millicent's pulse was steady and regular, and her lungs sounded clear. I was no nurse or doctor, but everything I knew told me she was just asleep. I laid

her in a more comfortable position before walking away to attune myself to the nearby Grace.

I took up the sacred tear absentmindedly, mixing it into my flasks to boost them. I then sat a ways away from the sleeping woman, with my back to a wall and commanding views of the access points.

While I remained half on alert (this was Caelid, after all), I also took out my instrument and began to play Kishi Ou no Hokori. I had been trying to adapt a lot of music I knew to this odd violin-like instrument with mixed success. Though I practiced for hours as the sun set in the red sky, my mind wasn't on my music. Whenever I tried to focus, my mind kept returning to the sick woman's words.

I would rather trust you than simply continue to spoil from within.

******

Getting into Redmane Castle had been surprisingly easy, all things considered.

I initially hadn't wanted to attempt it and only approached for a good look, but the army had been distracted by an incursion of the Rot Beasts. I still had to face fierce opposition, but it wasn't as well coordinated as I had expected. The forces, on average, were more challenging than Godrick's. They were more skilled and brutal but didn't cover their weak points or other castle accesses than the front gate.

The biggest challenge had been crossing the great bridge under the rain of siege equipment, but Torrent and I worked together perfectly. After sixteen years together, I barely needed to twitch to direct him where to go. We dodged bolts, boulders, vats of flaming oil, and soldiers alike. I felt like one of the steppe archers of old warriors who had been mistaken for centaurs.

Once we got past the fortifications along the bridge and to the side of the grand edifice, I casually walked in the back door.

From there, it was only a few guards between me and a Site of Grace in a massive feasting hall. Though the fires were not lit and food was scarce, I could tell the room could be occupied by over a hundred soldiers despite the Redgrave being much smaller than Stormveil. Beyond the hall was a wide plaza.

Large tables filled the space, as did stands and a towering bonfire that was unlit. Streamers and banners hung from the lines above. It looked like a festival ground, though one that hadn't been used in a while.

I cautiously made my way forward, wary of any soldiers or guards.

There were none.

I explored the area slowly before preceding forwards. Eventually, I came to the only occupant in this part of Redmane. An old knight sat reclined in a chair, his armour was

unusually colourful, almost jester-like, but I remained cautious despite his eccentric appearance. He looked up at my approach but made no move to ready himself for combat.

"Oh, Tarnished, are you? How did you slip inside with the gate closed?" He asked. His voice sounded like sandpaper on wood. "Hmph. No matter. In my book, if you can fell one of them, you're a champion. I am Jerren. Foolish old warrior and witness. Incidentally, do you like a good festival from time to time?" I blinked at the question.

"I'm a die-hard misanthrope and introvert, but even I can see that this place isn't good for a festival," I said, and he barked out a bitter laugh.

"Well, it's true. This fortress houses only the vanquished. But when the stars align, we celebrate. A war festival honouring the last battle and death of General Radahn, the mightiest Demigod of the Shattering, and bearer of a Great Rune."

"Radahn has died?" I asked, unaware that someone had beaten me to his Great Rune. Had my dawdling caused me to miss out?

"He died when Malenia's rot took him." The old man said seriously. "What wanders the dunes is but his body. Festering with rot and crippled by madness, he only wants an honourable death. Once the stars align, we host a festival of war. The greatest champions of the realm journey here, to Redmane, to participate. For seven days, they pitch themselves against the Demigod in the hope of being the one to slay him. Centuries have passed, and no one has yet bested the great general."

"So wait," I couldn't help but ask. "You're telling me that the best fighters in the Lands Between travel from all around for this 'Festival'? Which is them repeatedly throwing themselves at one of the greatest heroes to die and revive for seven days? And this has been going on for centuries?"

"That is a good summation, yes."

"That sounds awesome," I said wide-eyed. Was this a Dark Souls Raid Boss? Jesus Christ, Miyazaki, I wished I had gotten to play that. "When is the next festival?" I asked eagerly.

"You are the first to arrive and are welcome to reside in the castle while you wait." Jerren gestured to nearby rooms. "The next time the stars align is in eight years. It happens every twenty years or so. Enough time for warriors to train and travel before attempting it again."

"I have things to do in that time, though I definitely will be back for the festival," I said, pulling up a chair. "Can you talk to me for a bit? I have a bunch of questions about Radahn, Malenia, the Shattering and Caelid."

"I have some old war tales if you are interested." The old man said.

I ended up staying in Redmane for a week, talking to Jerren and exploring the castle. It was also an excellent time to allow Melina to spend outside spirit form as the castle was well protected from the rot.

As we were lying in bed together in one of the castle's guest rooms, Melina lay her head on my chest and looked up at me. Her sweaty and dishevelled appearance matched my own.

"Are you so eager for the festival, My Tarnished?"

"Hm?" I asked, my mind returning to the here and now.

"I find your gaze wandering to the Wailing Dunes often. Are you so eager to fight the Starscourge?" She asked me.

"Not really," I said honestly. "I think the festival will be incredible and the fight epic, but that isn't what's been bothering me."

"Then what ails you?"

"It's just…" I paused, struggling to put my feelings into words. "He was a Hero, you know. Capital H and everything. General Radahn, I mean. I've read the records of his time in Sellia. His focus of study was gravity magic, to which he dedicated his life. All so he wouldn't have to leave behind his horse. I know he admired his father, Radagon, and was a devotee of the Golden Order. His troops loved him, and everything I know indicates that he was worthy of it. Though I am not sure why even mad, he continues to carry out his wish to hold the stars in place."

"I am aware of his story," she said, pulling away to sit and look down at me. "Do not tell me your hands will be stalled by misguided pity. As the old knight has told you, Radahn would rather die in glorious combat than waste away, eaten alive by the rot."

"I know that," I said sharply. "I have done and will always do what I need to do." I took a deep breath, bringing my annoyance in check. For all our closeness, Melina did not understand everything I had been through. What I had to do to get here. It wasn't her fault I was keeping secrets. It seems like that was all I ever did. "I guess I am just feeling melancholic, that's all. That such a great man can be reduced to such a state."

"Mikael," Melina said softly, laying back down and snuggling up to me. "That is why you must become Elden Lord. So you may wield the power to stop such events."

"I will do my best."

As My Maiden fell asleep, I fiddled with a small dagger I kept by our bedside. The moon provided enough light for slit, yellow, draconic eyes to stare back at me.

I didn't tell Melina that even if I became Elden Lord, I probably wouldn't be around long enough to do much good.

I didn't tell her I saw a bit of myself in Radahn. The various Fromsoft worlds I travelled to were my own Wailing Dunes. Only I would never die.

I would rather trust you than simply continue to spoil from within.

Was the Freedom I sought my own Scarlet Rot?

******

Ironically, neither of those encounters had anything to do with dragons.

After my time in the rot-torn country, Stormveil castle turned out to be a cakewalk.

The path to the castle had been blocked by someone called Margit, but he hadn't been all that tough. Melina later told me it had only been a projection of Morgott, one of the demigods and the one who ruled over the capital, Leyndell. I'm sure the entire city would be a challenge, but if Margit/Morgott was the final boss, it shouldn't be too hard.

The front gates and pathways were as well defended as expected, but a disgruntled servant had kindly shown me a back passage. Of course, I wasn't surprised when he later tried to betray and kill me. This was Elden Ring, after all.

I hadn't been the only interloper in the castle, a man called Rogier and a bandit-like woman named Nepheli Loux. I explored the castle with the former for a few days, though we split up after killing another of those spiders made out of people and spite. He was interested in the basement of the castle. I was also interested, but I figured it would be better to kill the Demigod first and then explore. The soldiers would be in disarray. I made plans to meet up with him at Roundtable later.

I met Nepheli near a courtyard I knew Godrick used for his experiments in grafting. She was apparently the adopted daughter of Gideon and here as one of his agents. Much like Millicent, I was sure that relationship would eventually lead to a tragedy of some sort, but I held my tongue. I knew the old tarnished was shady, but the Nepheli spoke highly of him. She would have to see things for herself.

The fight with Godrick the Grafted turned out to be… well, it was something.

******

"Forefathers, one and all… Bear witness!" The two-meter-tall man covered in arms screamed. He had been a grotesque sight when I first laid eyes on him. He just cut off his left hand, shoved his stump into a dead dragon's throat, and spewed fire like a water hose.

"That is so hardcore and disgusting at the same time," I said from thirty feet away. "That can't be sanitary."

"Lowly Tarnished," he sneered. At least, I think it was a sneer. It was hard to pay attention to his tiny head when the rest of him was… a lot. "Burn!"

I saw flames gather in the dragon's maw and narrowed my draconian eyes.

Fire welled up from my own throat. Anime has taught me exactly what to do in situations like this.

The two waves of fire crashed into each other with cataclysmic force, bathing the courtyard

in flames. Mine was the greater power, but I quickly realized we weren't shooting beams at each other. We were both breathing like dragons, which meant fire.

Fire doesn't fight a fire; it just makes more fire. The inferno roasted my back as I ran away.

"Hot! Hot! Hot!"

Anime had lied to me.

******

Despite a hiccup, I killed the Demigod without dying once to him. Melina then told me to get the Great Rune's power, I had to go to the nearby Divine Tower. As soon as I stood before the Two Finger corpse and held the Godrick's Great Rune aloft, a new sense filled me.

A sense of completeness, stability and wholeness filled my chest. While it was powerful, I could feel that the true key to this Rune was the sense of unity it gave. It was like my body, previously made of different parts, was suddenly one whole. I knew with certainty that Godrick wouldn't have been anchored enough to attach and control so many disparate limbs without this Great Rune.

I then returned to Roundtable Hold. The first tarnished to slay a demigod and claim a Great Rune since the Shattering years ago.

It was eighteen years since I first woke up in that church, and I still had a long way to go.

Author's Note:

I'll be honest, this chapter is hit and miss with me. Some parts I like and others are a bit too threadbare. My new job has cut down my editing time but I will probably flesh it out a bit later. Nothing needs to change, but I feel I could do a better job setting the scenes.
I am also trying to be a different style when it comes to writing the relationship between Mikael and Melina. She is such a key character in Elden Ring but so little is known about her. So I am trying to imply a lot with only a little. Tell me how you feel about it.

DESOLATION III

He who does not travel, who does not read,
who can not hear music,
who does not find Grace in himself,
she who does not find Grace in herself,
dies slowly.

The first time Ranni the Witch met Mikael, she thought Melina had made a mistake in choosing her champion.

The Demi-god had approached the man after hearing rumours of a tarnished wandering Limgrave upon a spectral steed. While her network was not as wide-ranging as it had once been (Marika's Black Knives turned from her after that fateful night), such a phenomenon was noteworthy enough to reach her ears.

She had done as Torrent's former master had asked and bequeathed the Spirit Steed's new owner a Spirit Calling Bell and the Ashes. Her few minutes in his company had shown her one thing.

Melina's tarnished, Mikael, was a fool. A charming, funny fool but one nonetheless.

While Ranni had assumed the name Renna, as was her custom when projecting beyond the Manor, any tarnished worth their salt should have made at least the essential preparations for combat upon her appearance. The Lands Between was not such a nice place that encounters with unknown people were a good thing.

Instead, he had approached her fearlessly, made jokes, and seemed unconcerned that she could slay him with but a thought if she weren't bound to inaction. Though he would return, as Destined Death remained chained, even one death was usually traumatic enough for most tarnished to go mad.

Ranni dissipated her projection in a melancholy mood.

She was sure this was the last she would hear about the fool.

She felt terrible for Melina, whose hopes would be let down. She felt worse for poor Torrent. No doubt he would lose another master. In a way, Ranni even pitied the fool of a tarnished. Those few good-natured tarnished, led astray by the Two-Fingers, did not deserve to be caught up in her family's struggles for power or the machinations of the other eldritch beings.

That is why she set out upon this terrible and lonely path, to remove the temptation of Order from the world.

Her only remaining companions were dear Blaidd, stalwart Iji, and Adula. They all

knew none of them could take that final step with her. The Black Knives had left her, accomplishing their goal after slaying Godwyn. Seluvis could only be trusted to betray her. And Darriwil… well, Blaidd would find him soon enough and put the traitor to rest.

With these lonely thoughts, Ranni reappeared upon her tower and sat waiting for her Shadow to return. This doll body, modelled after her mentor, needed neither sustenance nor sleep. Despite so, Ranni chose to rest when she could to lessen the strain on it, as no mere doll could hold the absolute power of a Demi-god. In her sleep, she could wait.

Wait for the day Ranni was freed from the chains of her fate.

Wait to be able to act against her Two-Fingers.

Ranni stirred again years later. She was torn from her torpor by Blaidd's approach. As she expected, he returned with Darriwil's head. Needing but one glance to confirm it, the Demi-god had him throw it from the tower. Let the dogs or the birds have him. Her mood would not improve with the reminder of his betrayal.

The only thing of note was Blaidd's report on the operation. Her Shadow claimed a tarnished had aided him with slaying the Bloodhound Knight. The wolfman spoke at length about the man's skill at arms. He claimed to have recommended the warrior to visit Iji.

Ranni applauded his initiative. Her 'faction', small as it was, could use all the help they could get. Currently, only Blaidd was able to venture beyond the Manor. Any able-bodied and skilled warriors would be a force multiplier even if they only provided another set of eyes. The former Empyeran inquired further upon this capable tarnished.

As the witch listened to her Shadow elaborate, she thanked her doll body for the ability to remain expressionless. It wouldn't do for her followers to see her slack-jawed in surprise. One's image was important, after all.

Melina's buffoon of a tarnished was this skilled warrior?

How long had she rested?

Perhaps his time in the Lands Between had changed him. While he was tarnished and thus wouldn't die, he was still Mortal. They changed faster than most people she knew.

Still, once a fool, always a fool.

The tarnished had learned to fight, but character judgement and discernment were more critical in navigating the warring factions and the politics of the Roundtable Hold. One wrong word or errant joke, and the Two-Finger's Confessors would hunt him down.

Ranni did not doubt that his loud mouth would spell his doom eventually.

After the tale was finished, Ranni congratulated her Shadow again before urging him to return to Siofra. While Darriwil's betrayal had hurt, and the time wasted on his hunt set them back, he was only a side story. A distraction from finding the real goal.

The Fingerslaying Blade.

As Blaidd left, the Demi-god mused on the transient nature of mortals for a bit more before rendering her doll inert again.

She stayed that way for over a decade. Every once in a while, she would connect with her companions. Iji remained on watch at his forge. Seluvis continued to tinker with his puppets. Blaidd continued to search for Nokron. The Lands Between remained in its perpetual state, unchanged for centuries.

Then the news reached her ears.

Godrick had fallen.

A tarnished from beyond the fog had claimed a shard of the Elden Ring.

Had Ranni needed to breathe, she would have choked on air.

Something like this… it wasn't possible.

The War of the Shattering was between those related to Queen Marika the Eternal.

Certainly, there were some formidable tarnished out there.

Those such as Sir Gideon Ofnir and Fia formed their own faction or joined existing ones. Occasionally a tarnished of renown would cross the fog and attempt to fell the Demigods. The strongest had been Vyke, but he had been driven mad well before slaying one.

None ever succeeded.

The first Elden Lord and forefather of the tarnished, Horax Loux, had made his conquests with the aid of Marika. Since his banishment millennia ago, the tarnished had no voice in deciding the fate of the Lands Between and the world. Though they received Grace once more, that fact had persisted, despite what those of the Roundtable Hold thought.

A Great Rune of the Elden Ring wasn't just a source of power. It was legitimacy. One would be entitled to be crowned Elden Lord by holding more than one. The Great Runes were such force multipliers that if any of the Demi-gods held two or more shards, they would be able to defeat the others.

Whoever this tarnished was, they needed only to claim one more Great Rune and then face Morgott at the foot of the Erd tree, and they would be able to stand before Marika by right.

A pit formed in Ranni's stomach after she got over her surprise at the news.

Godrick had always been the least of the Demigods, more so after his defeat at Malenia's hands. Only her half-sister's disdain for all those but her twin that had spared the Grafted that day. If one of the Demi-gods were to fall, it would be him. He had been such an obvious target.

The next target, however, was just as obvious.

Her mother.

The Great Rune of the Unborn was not one of the Seven shards claimed after the Elden Ring was split before the Shattering of Order. Rennala played no part in the War, sequestered away in her library. Ranni had been happy to leave her mother there. While she was still mad with despair after her father's betrayal, her sweetings provided her with company, and she was safe from the outside world.

But the outside world would be coming to get her now. Either the vultures would come or worse, the tarnished who had slain Godrick.

Ranni had deployed what defences she could, which unfortunately wasn't much. She was still bound to hide until she had the finger-slaying blade, so she hatched a plot.

She was good at those.

To conserve power, as well as hide her involvement, Ranni crafted but two spells. The first was a simple alert and vigilance spell that had been present before, but Ranni took the chance to upgrade it. It would let her know when alien beings breached the library and allow her to view the location remotely. Her mother's sweetings would defeat the vultures and the weak, so Ranni needed only care for the truly dangerous.

Her second spell was much more complex. An illusion, the likes of which she had never woven before. It was supposed to recreate the Rennala of Ranni's childhood. With her full majesty and powers. Any foe wishing to slay the Full Moon Queen must face her at her peak, as Radagon did millennia ago. As extra insurance, Ranni added Ashes of her companions to the illusion. She hoped they would never be needed.

Any foe that could triumph over all that would be one Ranni couldn't face as she was, trapped in her tower. At that point, all the Demi-god would be able to do would be to pray that the victor would claim the Great Rune and leave her mother in peace. Unlike the other Great Runes, the Unborn was not internalized by its holder but rather fused into the amber her mother held.

Her work done, Ranni sat back and waited. She was sure that after the first few invaders were slaughtered, others would wise up and seek other prey.

The Demi-god was unsurprised a few years later when her first spell tripped, alerting her to an invader in her mother's chamber.

Ranni was surprised upon seeing who it was.

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"Are these children?" Melina's tarnished asked. What was his name again? She hadn't

talked to him in two decades. All she remembered was that he was Torrent's current master and a fool.

The man had entered the library wary and ready for battle. Clearly, his two decades in the Lands Between had taught him caution. However, it did not seem to stop his mouth. He had surveyed the room, spotted her mother in her cocoon and turned his attention to the sweetings that covered the floor—all four score of them.

"Stop that!" He said, stepping over one that had tried to grab him. He ducked another's tossed book. "Hey! Don't do that! I want to read these."

While the sweetings were determined to protect Renalla, their ability to do so was limited. The greatest challenge they posed was as impediments to his walking. The tarnished wasted no time discovering the key to her mother's spell. He turned to the singing students and knocked them out with his blade's sheath.

The only time Ranni ever saw the man so much as sweat was when a few of the impaired students attempted to breathe fire at him.

"You philistines!" He swore, ducking out of the way. "These are books! That's fire! Never shall the two meet!" He swung his sheath, knocking the offending student out. Wasting no time, he jumped upon the flames that had caught on the books and put them out quickly.

Perhaps, had the sweetings been in a better state of mind, they would have been able to use his concern for the library against him. But the thought never entered their naive little heads, and it took less than five minutes for the tarnished to incapacitate all the students supporting her mother. The man kept up his inane babble, cracking jokes and making puns.

Rennala fell, her golden cocoon shattered and the tarnished made his leisurely approach.

"Sorry about this," he said casually. He finally unsheathed his blade, a magic one of eastern origin. "From where you're lying, it must seem like an 18-carat run of bad luck. Truth is… the game was rigged from the start."

Ranni invoked her spell.

"Upon my name as Ranni the Witch. Mother's rich slumber shall not be disturbed by thee. Foul trespasser. Send word far and wide. Of the last Queen of Caria, Rennala of the Full Moon. And the majesty of the night she conjureth." At her words, the tarnished flinched, looking around the library.

Then the world changed.

Gone was the library and the sweetings. In its place was an ocean of blue, upon which the man stood. A tremendous white moon hovered behind her mother. This wasn't the pitiful, heartbroken woman who had lost her husband and daughter.

This was Rennala, Queen of the Full Moon. The woman who fought the second Elden Lord to a standstill.

“Rom?” The tarnished said stupidly, blinking in surprise. That should have been his last word as a Comet Azur tore through his standing place with the power to destroy castles.

Somehow and someway, the tarnished managed to dodge by rolling away in an ungraceful heap.

No matter, one lucky escape would not change his fate. He would die here as often as it took to send the message that Rennala was not to be touched. Perhaps Ranni would inform Melina to steer her tarnished towards the other Demi-gods.

After a few deaths, of course.

Her tarnished had tried to kill her mother, after all.

It took a bit for the Demi-god to recognize the change.

It was subtle at first.

What rose from that undignified heap on the ground was not the tarnished Ranni knew.

He stood, managing to evade a shower of stars. He approached Rennala in a dash, but a crystal burst pushed him back. That, too, he managed to dodge. The homing mass of crystals her mother summoned was deflected on his shield. Any spell that the Queen cast was either evaded, deflected or blocked. While the woman could barely keep him away, the tarnished was steadily making his way forward.

As the seconds of battle ticked away, spells were dodged by a fraction of an inch; Ranni tried to put together what was different about him. Then she realized;

He had not said a word in minutes.

No joking, no laughing, no casual and easy dismissal. He did not grunt when blocking, nor did he pant from exertion.

As the minutes passed and her mother started accumulating little cuts from occasional strikes, Ranni realized she would lose. Rennala, Queen of the Full Moon, was going to lose to some no-name tarnished. The man never had the opportunity for a finishing strike, but damage still accumulated.

Ranni would not allow that to happen.

The Demi-god had hoped not to need this feature.

So far, everything that had happened could be attributed to her mother. People would think that her faculties had returned in a moment of danger. Ranni’s faction was understaffed, and she was tower-bound. Secrecy and shadow were her best defences.

For her mother, she would risk reveal.

Besides, so long as her exact location wasn’t known, it wasn’t the end of the world.

The spiritual form of Adula appeared behind the Queen, a blue flame of glintstone sorceries gathering in his jaws.

The blast of magical power was met by a roar of fire from the tarnished’s mouth. While the

explosion was mitigated, steam rose from the conflagration, inhibiting the tarnished's vision.

The man almost died to the blade of Darriwill as the spectral Bloodhound Knight stabbed him from behind.

Whatever preternatural reflexes the man possessed saved his life, but the blade cut a swath of his shield arm open. No sound escaped the tarnished as the man twisted away.

He was met with the towering form of Iji, the troll already swinging his hammer down to crush the interloper into a paste.

Somehow, the tarnished managed to lift his mangled arm, despite the immense pain he must be in. He deflected the blow rather than take it full on.

The shadow of her Shadow dealt the first real blow. The spectral wolfman swung the Royal Greatsword and separated the extended arm from its shoulder.

The tarnished, still eerily silent, impaled the imitation of Blaidd through the armpit before it could recover from its swing.

It didn't matter.

The imitation Ashes were only there to buy her mother a few moments. Their disarming of the tarnished was a boon but not necessary.

In war, the duty of the frontlines was to gather time for the sorcerers to craft their greatest spells.

Rennala's Full Moon, the spell which had carved her name into legend as it decimated countries, descended on the tarnished.

Handicapped, bleeding, and in pain as he was, he could not even try to evade.

The blast was cataclysmic.

Power boiled out from the epicentre, covering a radius large enough to change maps. Had this been the real world, Raya Lucaria would be a memory, and Liurnia would have a new lake.

Nothing but a god could have survived it, and even then, they wouldn't be unharmed.

As the illusion of Rennala floated to the ground, Ranni was prepared to dismiss her spell. The Demi-god was certain she had made her point.

A blade burst from Rennala's chest.

The tarnished, in a second, removed it and swung. The Queen of the Full Moon's head fell at her feet.

Ranni watched, numb in surprise.

How!

There was no way he could have survived that blast.

The illusion started to dissipate. As it did, Ranni watched the tarnished use his one good hand to sheath his sword. He bent down and picked up two items at his feet. The first was a seal of the Dragon Communion. The other was a Flask filled with opaline water.

What a marvellous plot.

To snatch victory from the moment of defeat.

The Demi-god watched, terrified, as Melina's tarnished approached her mother. Her real mother. The illusionary world was long gone, and in its place was a woman cradling a piece of amber, cooing softly to it.

Ranni's last hope fell.

Rennala was too far gone to put up any more of a fight.

The tarnished made no move to redraw his weapon, instead placing his hand upon the amber as well. When he withdrew his palm, a Great Rune was floating in it. Smaller than any others, the Great Rune of the Unborn still marked this tarnished as a valid contender for the throne.

Ranni watched the Tarnished walk from the library, picking up his severed arm and shield on the way.

For the first time, her unmolested mother spoke words that were not insane babbling or cooing indulgences to the amber.

"Oh, little Ranni, my dear daughter." The Demi-gods felt emotion well in her chest. Her mother was lucid enough to have recognized her spells. "Weave thy night into being."

"I will, mother." Though there would be no way for the Carian Queen to hear her, immaterial as Ranni was, the woman's face curved into a small, hidden smile.

Looking at that rare expression on the beautiful woman's face, Ranni finally remembered.

Mikael.

That was his name.

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Ranni thanked her doll body once more.

She could fidget all she wanted in her spiritual form, and her physical form would remain a picture of composed grace. One of the earliest lessons her mother had taught her was the importance of image and reputation.

It had served her well over the centuries and would do so here.

The Demi-god eyed the almanac as steps echoed in the distance.

The book was of suitable thickness and of a size with the others she was already sitting on. She had debated with herself back and forth on whether to add it to the pile when Iji had alerted her to Mikael's impending arrival.

This would be her first visit since the Night of the Black Knives. More than that, this tarnished already possessed the qualifications to vie for the title of Elden Lord. Perhaps of

most import was that the tarnished was currently unaffiliated with any current faction.

Melina was not included, of course.

He was already friendly with Blaidd. If she could leverage his aid, the search for the Fingerslaying blade would be so much easier. Any more than that would be on her alone.

To facilitate such an offer, the image Ranni presented was vital.

In the end, the Demi-god ruled that the almanac was too large. It would place her above his eye level, which had benefits, but it would be too obvious.

As it was, the three books and a cushion already under her were already poking out a bit from the cover. Her cloak could hide the edges, but her image would be ruined if he discovered the trick.

Ranni had no more time for frivolous thoughts as Mikael entered the room.

He was an imposing sight. While shorter than Blaidd, he was taller than most tarnished. Despite being garbed in armour similar to that of the Kaiden Sellswords, his presence was lackadaisical. His weapons, a great bow and eastern sword, were put away. He held himself as a jester or a fop, with no tension in his body. He walked confidently and casually as if he were entering his home, not a Demi-god's tower.

Of the fearsome man that slew Rennala of the Full Moon, Ranni could see nothing.

"Oh, again we cross paths." She said as casually as she could. While silence could be an effective tool in diplomacy, it wouldn't have the effect she desired. "I believe I said my name was Renna when last we met. It pleaseth me to see Torrent hale and hearty…" The spectral steed was visible to her and looked well taken care of. Ranni paused, letting the moment hang in case he would interject. He didn't. His draconic eyes casually swept the room around them once before refocusing on her. "But Tarnished, what business hast thou here? I have no memory of inking thee an invitation." A polite way of saying that he better have a good reason for barging in.

"Renna," he said in a contemplative way. She could hear the teasing smile in his voice as he looked down at her. Why was he so tall? Her doll body's short stature was never significant before now. "See, I heard differently. Word on the wind is that you are Ranni the Witch, the one behind the Night of the Black Knives. Also, the one that almost killed me in Raya Lucaria."

"I see. Quite the sleuth, aren't we." While Ranni missed the larger frame of her original body, she was glad that the tarnished had no way of seeing her blush in embarrassment. She hadn't known him to be so well informed nor to remember her words. That was years ago. Still, this could be useful. "Tis true, I stole a fragment of the Rune of Death and used it to forge the god slaying black knives through fearsome rite. I did it all. What matters it to thee?"

“To be honest, I don’t really care,” the tarnished’s armour and weapons jangled as he shrugged. “I’m doing a fetch quest for someone else. They have something I want, and to get it, I need to get a cursemark that you supposedly have.”

“Sadly for thee, the cursemark thou seekest is not to be found here,” Ranni said, the words a bit colder than she had intended. He wasn’t here at Blaidd’s urging but at the behest of another faction. Probably those who gathered around her deceased half-kin. “I have slain the body I was born into and cast it away. And it is upon that flesh the cursemark is carved.”

“That’s… pretty cool, actually.” Mikeal nodded in surprised approval at her words. A thrill of pleasure shot through her. The first praise she had received in centuries. She had been almost entirely alone since the plot. “To toss away your body like years old clothes takes some hardcore dedication. But if you’re not using it anymore, could you point me in its direction?”

“And why should I reveal that to thee?” Ranni saw an opportunity here. The tarnished was on this quest for a reward. That implied a certain mercenary mindset that she could work with. “I performed the act not to bury the past, nor in shame of the deed. If thou wish the information, begging shall not compel me. Rather, wouldst thou render me aid? Enter my service for a time, and thou shalt have thy location.”

“A chain fetch quest?” Mikael sighed before waiving his hand casually, urging her to continue.

One day, she would need to reprimand him on his manners.

“There is, in my service, a half-wolven warrior by the name of Blaidd whom thou are familiar with. I would have thee join him in searching for the hidden treasure of Nokron, the Eternal City.”

“What are you looking for?” He tilted his head inquisitively.

“The Fingerslaying blade,” she said seriously. “Should thou accept, once it is in my possession, the cursemark shall be thine.”

“Hm,” he hummed in thought. “Blaidd is a cool guy and all, but if I’m going to do this, then there needs to be a few caveats.”

“Thou would bargain with a Demi-god?” Ranni asked in surprise. Did his audacity know no bounds?

“Doll, please.” The way he said ‘doll’ made the woman believe he was not referencing her physical form. “Gods, Demigods, Devils, Demons, and Dragons do not matter to me. At the end of the game, both the king and the pawn go in the same box.” That was a good saying, Ranni thought. She would have to use it later.

“Very well, state your terms tarnished.”

“I don’t mind dying,” Mikael said casually. “Fighting and killing are also easy for me. While I’m working for you, however, I will not be tied down. There are other things I need to do in the Lands Between.”

“If thou should prove instrumental in acquiring the blade, your wanderings will not be inhibited.” It wasn’t a hard request to acknowledge. It wasn’t like she could exert much control anyway. “However, should thou provide no benefit in the search, or worse, prove a detriment, then thou shalt never have the cursemark.”

“We have a deal then,” the tarnished nodded to himself. “Where to, your handliness?”

“I shall call for Blaidd to greet thee below.” With barely an effort, Ranni called forth a projection of the men at the bottom of her Rise. No need for them to actually move. “Take from him the particulars. Ah, and there wilt thou find Iji, my war counsellor, and Seluvis, preceptor in the sorcerous arts, also. Heed not their peculiarities; feel secure in gaining what advantage thou canst from them. I am sure the others will be doing just the same.”

“I’ve met two of them already,” Mikael shook his head in wry amusement. “You keep odd company for a Demi-god.”

“It hath been a passing long time since a newcomer entered my service,” she acknowledged.

“Well, if nothing else, a treasure hunt sounds fun.” He rolled his shoulders and made for the exit before pausing. “I have a few contacts I can hit up about possible locations for Nokron. Anything else I need to be aware of?”

“Allow me to forewarn thee. I shall soon enter my slumber. And it will be some time before I wake.” Ranni had been more active in the last few decades than in centuries. That drew power the doll was not used to. “This doll’s body is not without its hindrances… Still, I have high hopes for thee. I look forward to the good news when I arise.”

“Sleep tight,” Mikael did an odd wave as he walked away, his wrist twisting in casual dismissal. “Don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

Ranni watched the odd tarnished descend the stairs. She had to stay awake a bit longer to maintain her companion’s projections.

Left by herself once more, the Demi-god eyed the almanac once more.

She stood, walked to the book, and returned it to her chair. Ranni placed the thick tome under the blanket, carefully arranging the cover once more to hide as much as possible before she retook her seat.

The next few minutes were spent meticulously moving her cloak to hide her newly gained height.

Let’s see Mikael look down on her now!

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“Doo-do-do-dooooo,” the tarnished pantomimed a trumpet with his hands as he entered her room upon the tower. He walked as casually as he had all those years ago, uncaring that he was entering the place of power of Ranni the Witch.

Uncaring that he had changed the world.

Ranni fought not to stare for several reasons.

This was partially because Mikael was not wearing a helmet, allowing her to get a good look at the tarnished for the first time. Most apparent were his yellow, draconic eyes. His partaking in Dragon Communion was well known in the Lands Between. He was the first in millennia and had progressed the furthest without succumbing to its mad taint. Most who succeeded in the ritual went mad after their first consumption of a heart, transforming into the magma wyrms that were their fate. Before Mikael, the most successful had been Theoderix, a hero of renown who had managed to consume three before succumbing.

According to Blaidd, Mikael claimed to have consumed nine draconic hearts.

The rest of his face told Ranni as much about him as his eyes. His skin was tanned, as was expected of someone in his profession, but did not show the wear and tear of the road. He had squarish features with only a hint of roundness around the cheeks. He appeared to be a crossbreed between the standard type of the tarnished and a Numen.

His hair was dark, almost black, and fell to his shoulders in wavy layers. It was well cared for, lacking the issues most faced when they wore helmets most of the time. This spoke of regular care and effort, bathing regularly, which was rare for the warrior type.

It all presented an image of an above-average-looking man, likely of noble stock, who took care of himself. Ranni’s guess all those years ago would probably be correct on looks alone: some noble-born fop. Someone more concerned with worming his way into a noble lady’s pants than with the real concerns of his realm.

That impression was wholly wrong, as Ranni now knew.

“I welcome thee, tarnished,” Ranni said after his little fanfare finished. The doll remained the picture of calm, not showing the emotions warring within the Demigod. “I hath heard tales of thy travels. Pray tell me, why hath thy returned.”

“I come bearing gifts,” he said grandly. He performed an over-the-top bow, his hand flashing for a moment, and there it was.

The Fingerslaying blade.

She had been searching for it for centuries, and this tarnished had discovered its location and retrieved it in under ten years.

Ranni toyed with the item idly for a moment, Mikael standing up and watching her do it. Such a small thing, such a huge impact.

“I thank thee, brave tarnished. It was thee, not Blaidd, who retrieved the hidden treasure of Nokron.” A wealth of emotion welled up in her, but she pushed them aside for now. There were things she had to know before the departure. “If thou has the time, I would hear of thy tale from thine own lips.”

“Sure,” Mikael leaned against the wall relaxedly, eyeing her. “By the way, did you get taller?”

“What led to the discovery of the blade?” Ranni asked, ignoring his question. The doll didn’t move or fidget, and she was careful not to dislodge the blanket or her cloak.

“I went to Siofra like you said. Beautiful place, even if Torrent still doesn’t like being underground. Met up with Blaidd, and we explored for a while. Killed a ghost moose and a draconic giant. But we never found a way to Nokron even years of exploration.” Ranni was not surprised. Blaidd had been searching for centuries with no success. But what was a ‘moose’?

“I got in touch with a few people,” Mikael continued. “One of them, my teacher in sorcery, was able to point me in the right direction. She said your fate is tied to the stars, and Radahn was holding them in place. The next festival was less than a year away, so I let Blaidd know, bummed around the Plateau for a bit, and we met up at Redmane.” The tarnished grinned, his eyes distant.

“Where thou slew my brother,” Ranni said simply.

As if killing one of the greatest warriors the world had ever seen was simple.

As if doing what Malenia, Blade of Miquella, couldn’t was an everyday thing.

Starscourge Radahn was infected with Rot and half mad. He dedicated most of his power to holding back the stars and protecting Leonard. Despite all this, he had never been felled even after centuries of warriors pitting themselves against him.

Over a hundred years ago, Blaidd joined one of the festivals. The wolfman was a warrior with few equals and had been accompanied by dozens of skilled combatants.

They were all slaughtered.

They had pitted themselves against the general for seven days and been found wanting. Radahn had fought for the entire week, outnumbered and without rest. He emerged triumphant, carrying out his wandering of the Wailing Dunes while his foes retreated in despair and anguish.

Now, very few sought to join the festivals. What was once a gathering of dozens had shrunken to a handful. Nobody truly believed Radahn could be beaten.

The tarnished before her proved otherwise.

“Yep,” Mikael popped the ‘p’ as he continued to grin in fond reminiscence. “Those were a hectic few days, and the party afterwards was raucous. Blaidd can really drink, I tell you. So can Alexander and Lionel. Tragoth was a lightweight, though.”

“How?” How had he managed when all others had failed? How had this tarnished with no renown slain one of the most formidable Demi-gods, a sorcerer with few equals and a warrior with only one peer?

“Hm,” the tarnished must have sensed her incredulity because he grinned at her. “I stabbed him with the pointy bit, of course. It’s not rocket science.”

Ranni did not know what ‘rocket science’ was, but she could tell when she was being teased. She allowed the doll’s eyes to narrow at Mikael. Far from being intimidated, he simply chuckled.

“Fine, fine,” he waived off her glare with good humour. “I’ll tell you the key points, though I would have thought Blaidd would have given you the details.”

“My Shadow holds thine abilities with great admiration and described his battle with great detail,” the Demi-god admitted. “However, he was felled before the climax.”

“That’s right,” Mikale said in realization. “Sorry, those four days were a blur of death, rebirth, violence, and slaughter. When I heard it called a festival of war, I thought Jerren was being pretentious, but man was I wrong. He killed me eight times. Eight! Radahn was a beast.”

A mere eight times.

Blaidd, her Shadow and a warrior millennia old, had died two dozen times at least in those four days. Most tarnished went mad and gave up after one or two deaths.

Ranni was starting to realize just what kind of fool Melina’s tarnished really was.

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Sweat beaded my brow under my helmet. I could hear the roar of my heart as it pounded in my ears. Adrenaline threw everything into a hazy focus. If one didn’t count my deaths, I would have been awake for over ninety hours.

My body would revive after death but fatigue still accumulated.

I was tired, hungry, thirsty, and blinking spots from my eyes.

I had never felt more alive.

I balanced precariously upon Torrent’s back. Body Talent ensured I could ride like the best of the best, which included standing up in the saddle.

The added height was useful to survey the battle.

The last four days of combat had been like nothing I had ever experienced.

This wasn't a duel.

It was a siege!

I watched Alexander shatter once more, leaving only me and Tragoth standing. The jar champion would pull himself together in six hours, I judged based on the last few days. Tragoth was a tank of a man, and he could hold under one or two of Radahn's swings with his heavy armour.

He was one of the few who could.

I had learned early that if I got hit, I died. Radahn was just too massive, strong, and quick for any blow to not be lethal. Injuries were uncommon, so I was either in total health or dead. Whether it was his great bow, gargantuan double blades, or simple mass, Starscourge Radahn was larger than life in every sense. I couldn't block or deflect any of his blows. It was either be hit or dodge.

Eight times had I died, each teaching me a valuable lesson on approaching this fight.

Everyone had died more often, except for Patches, who left as soon as the battle began. Torrent's mobility and our cooperation were the only reason I had kept my fatalities to a minimum.

I had to approach this battle not as a warrior but as a fellow general. On the first day, everyone had been dead at the same time for a while. In just a few hours, all the wounds we had inflicted had healed.

The last few days had been a haze of concentration and planning. I spent my companion's lives cheaply, balancing their death and reviving times to ensure that Radahn wasn't ever alone and that any combatants were paired in such a way they could survive until the next batch was ready.

I spent my own life just as cheaply. I only engaged head-on occasionally when I knew the others could hold out till I reformed, inflicting what wounds I could. Blood flowed freely from them, but they were not slowing the Red Lion down by much.

"Hold!" I shouted as Tragoth flinched away from a double swing of the great swords. I recognized the move. Radahn was facing away from me, focusing on the more present threat. While I had harried him often, I died quickly due to my lighter armour.

I could almost see his mind work out the plan of the fight.

A complete offensive attack on Great Horned Tragoth would kill the tarnished quickly. Once he died, Radahn and Leonard could chase me down. It would be half an hour before Blaidd, Okina, and Therolina would be ready for battle again. He would have plenty of time to address his wounds.

Unfortunately for him, this also presented me with an opportunity.

I urged Torrent into a dash at Radahn's back.

I watched the Starscourge beardown on the other tarnished. Great Horned Tragoth might have flinched at the Red Lion's charge, but he recovered admirably. He was too slow to evade the coming attack, but he was still a skilled warrior.

Rather than futilely try and step away, the man stepped towards one of the greatswords. He took the blow on the horned armour that gave him his moniker, but it prevented the other impact from reaching him as well as minimizing the damage. He was pushed back, but he survived.

Radahn would need at least another blow to fell the tarnished. As the great general pressed for another attack, I approached on Torrent. With a kick of my heels, best boi knew precisely what to do.

He jumped into the air. For a second, we rose in a smooth arch. Then Torrent jumped again, spiritual power at his feet, providing a platform in the air. He could only do it once, but this double jump had saved our lives several times.

As I had mentioned, Radahn was massive. Over eight meters tall, his sheer size was an impediment to any fight against him. Most of the wounds we had inflicted were around his legs, not near anything vital.

At the apex of Torrent's rise, I jumped from his back. After the first day, I had stowed my shield as it was useless in this fight, and I had slung my bow on my back a few moments ago. Moonveil was held in both my hands as I flew.

The katana impaled the Red Lion in between his clavicle and his neck. The tender area not covered by his helmet or armour being the only viable target. I did not have the strength nor the weapon to sever the Demi-god's enormous neck.

Radahn roared in pain, the first sign of significant damage since the fight began. I had less than a second of opportunity before I was cast off and had no weapon.

That was fine.

The stab was not the real attack.

It just gave me leverage.

As the Starscourge screamed his fury, pain, and rage to the sky, I Breathed.

Over the last few days, I had realized that neither my magic nor fire breath did any significant damage to the man. More than that, atop Leonard, he was fast enough to avoid most of the spread. I needed a point-blank blow to inflict any severe wound on the man.

Scarlet Rot flowed down the giant general, the red haze entering his open mouth and the gaps in his armour as Ekzykes Decay consumed the Demi-god.

For three seconds, the fight paused.

Radahn was silent as his flesh bubbled and writhed under the cursed blight. I could smell the vile scent, even as I continued to fill him with the foul Breath.

Then he moved once more, roaring in rage. Bucking, he launched me from his back. I

managed to hold on to my blade but was still thrown into the air.

I readied myself to roll on the ground. There would be a moment of weakness that the Starscourge would use to end me. If I was lucky, I could dodge it. If not, Tragoth would need to hold out until the next batch reformed, or we would lose our accumulated progress.

I hit the ground on my back, my breath pushed from me by the impact. It was only a moment of passivity, but I knew that was enough to doom me. I rolled quickly, expecting to feel the crushing blow of the greatswords turning my body to mush.

It never came.

I found my feet, looking to my greatest foe yet.

He looked ready to strike me down, as I had expected, but he had stumbled. Blood gushed from his mouth as the Scarlet Rot took its toll.

For a moment, just a moment, I thought the battle was over. That Ekzykes Decay alone was enough to put the final nail in the coffin of this once great man.

Then he regained his footing and jumped.

He must have been using his magic to alter his weight because he jumped so high as to disappear into the sky. Leonard was gone as well.

Tragoth and I blinked at the sky stupidly, not understanding the sudden disappearance of the Starscorge.

“Did he… run away?” I couldn’t help but ask my fellow tarnished, who could only shrug. I would have followed my question with a stupid comment to break the tension, but my companion nodded behind me.

I turned to see Jerren running towards us. The jester-looking knight had not participated in the battle so far, claiming that until he saw proof that we stood a chance, there was no point in adding another body to the pile.

The last clash must have been enough to confirm his belief in us as he rushed our way, blade in hand. He was over a football field away, so I couldn’t hear him, but his frantic gestures towards the sky behind us was enough of a clue.

I whirled, blade at the ready. For a moment, I did not know what the old knight was pointing at.

Then I noticed a star getting larger. And larger. And larger.

My long-trained instincts realized the danger before my conscious mind did.

“I call bullshit!” I screamed, even as my hands withdrew the Flask of Wonderous Physick. I barely had time to drink the magical mixture before the world exploded.

The ground shook as fire bloomed all around me. The noise was deafening, and I was blown away by the force of the blast. My opaline shield shattered under the blow. It did its job, but the explosion was so cataclysmic that I survived only through the health benefit of the mixture.

I flew, ass-over-teakettle, away from the force of the impact. My head rang as I scrambled to my feet.

Dust billowed out like a sandstorm, hiding everything from view. Again, it was ingrained instinct that saved me. I was so used to casting my follow-up after my shield shattered that it was a habit.

I used to only use Assassin's Approach, but after my brief time in Altus, I combined the incantation with Unseen Form into the pinnacle of stealth. It was prohibitively expensive on my reserves, but the combo had been the key to my success in many of my more challenging fights.

I would have died if I had tried to remain hidden using only the dust cloud.

Every particle in the air fell to the ground in less time than it took the eye to blink.

I got a good look at the area for the first time and nearly gapped in shock.

The Wailing Dunes were just gone.

Where once had been rolling hills of sand, covered in blood, bodies, and blades, was now a glassed and cracked crater. It stretched on farther than I could see.

Radahn, the mad bastard, had pulled a Madara. Only HE was the meteor!

The Red Lion was less than twenty meters from me, atop Leonard. I had no idea how the scrawny steed had survived the impact, but he was still struggling on.

Tragoth had not survived. No amount of armour was capable of taking that blow.

Jerren was approaching quickly, and Radahn rode out to meet his former soldier. I took a deep breath before charging at the general's back. I could use this opportunity to end this, as I had when facing Rennala.

Jerren proved his skill, holding out under the concentrated assault from the Red Lion for a minute as I stealthily made my way closer.

My plan was foiled as a wave of purple magic spread hundreds of meters from Radahn.

My spell fizzled as gravity lurched.

One of the universe's fundamental forces was bent as reality warped under Radahn's will and magic.

For a moment, I could see Jerren's eyes widen under his cowl as his form tripped under the spell. He knew he would die for the stumble, but I saw him give a feral grin as his eyes met mine. Like Radahn, he had thought I died in the blast.

Radahn's great sword bisected the old man, the bloody carcass flying away as the general roared triumphantly.

My great arrow pierced the back of his neck, blood fountaining in front of him.

Despite what should have been a mortal wound, the Demi-god reacted quickly. Though he coughed blood, he still whirled Leonard around to face me. The bolt was poking out of where his adam's apple should be.

He gurgled a roar, purple magic gathering around his blades. Lightning gathered around him, four enormous boulders floating up.

I was already running at him when the first flew at me.

There were no invincibility frames in real life, so I had to dodge completely. Even a glancing blow from one of those mini-meteors would pulverize me. But when I tried to move to the side, the stone bent in the air to follow my path. They weren't super maneuverable, but unless I did something drastic, I would die.

I spent months studying sorceries in Sellia. The magic in the Lands Between was different from that of Dark Souls, so I had started from ground zero in magic. Between Sellia, my year in Raya Lucaria's library, and Sellen's tutelage, my Magical Talent could flourish.

So I jumped.

I couldn't reach the same height that the general had achieved, but I had studied the notes of the young Demi-god as well as the memoires of the Alabaster Lord that taught the young Radahn.

I landed on the first boulder, taking a few steps forward to propel myself high enough to launch over the second.

Purple magic gathered along Moonveil as I cut through the third boulder mid-air.

Following closely behind the third, the fourth boulder would have killed me had I been alone.

But I wasn't alone.

Torrent formed under me as we flew through the sky. The spectral steed was able to create another platform at his hooves, leaping over the last stone and presenting a clear path to the Demi-god.

The great swords bore down on us, but, in a move we had practiced a thousand times, I jumped from Torrent's back as the steed astralized.

With nothing left to block me, Moonveil plunged downward.

My blade found purchase in the eye of the giant.

As I rode the great general to the ground, I roared in a bloodthirsty frenzy.

Infected with Scarlet Rot, bathed in Ekzykes Decay, with his neck pierced by an arrow the size of a log and a blade protruding from his eye, Starscourge Radahn finally died.

Leonard, unsupported by the Red Lion's magic, passed on soon after.

Atop the body of the Red Lion, I watched the stars fall.

******

"Tis… quite the tale," Ranni said in the silence that followed Mikael's recounting. She

wasn't particularly heartbroken about Radahn's death. None of the siblings or half-siblings were close, except for the twins Malenia and Miquella. Rykard, her other brother, was only more intimate to her because they were both joined in rebellion against the Golden Order and the Erd Tree. The simple fact was they were all born decades or even centuries apart. They rarely interacted before the Night of Black Knives, and everything after that was par for the course. "Had Blaidd not substantiated the telling, I would have taken thee for a braggart."

"What can I say," the tarnished pretended to buff his nails on his chest and look them over. He was wearing gauntlets. "I'm awesome like that. To be honest, I am a bit bummed. I think I could have taken him down alone if I had a month or two, but the festival was fun."

"And how did thou find the blade?" Ranni didn't react to the man's absurd claim. She knew the gist of what followed but wanted to hear if he had anything to add.

"One of the stars blasted a hole in Limgrave when it crashed," Mikael shrugged. "I followed it down and found Nokron under it. Besides a few differences, it was very similar to Siofra. Took a few years of exploration, but I found the blade after killing a few Bosses."

As ever, the tarnished words were a mix of casual dismissal, absurd comments, and extravagant claims.

Ranni took a deep breath, though her doll did not move.

The tale was irrelevant, after all. Now that she had the blade, the next step was clear.

A wellspring of sadness sprung in her breast, but she did not waver. She knew it would be a lonely end when she embarked on this path. It was time to part ways with everyone.

"My thanks for the blade and the tale," Ranni said, stowing the treasure in a magical subspace. "Finally, all the pieces are in place. Soon must I begin my journey. Upon the dark path only I may tread. As promised, I shall entrust thee with this."

From that same subspace, the Demi-god removed the Inverted Statue.

"Your words are not ominous at all," Mikael muttered as he picked up the statue. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Place it upon the altar in the Study Hall. The path to the divine tower and my discarded flesh shall be clear from there," she explained. Taking one last look at the tarnished who had changed the world and her fate, Ranni couldn't help but add, "I am certain now, fate steered us to our reunion. I must thank Torrent, too, for his part."

"I don't believe in fate," Mikael casually tossed the statue over end in his hand. "Fate is an excuse for those too cowardly and ignorant to chase their dreams and freedom." Ranni considered staying and talking more with this strange tarnished for a moment. She

wanted to pick his mind, to understand what sort of madness infected the mind of the man who now held three-eighths of the Elden Ring.

But the moment passed. Ranni had too much to do and little time to do it. As it was, she had wasted time hearing about the battle.

“You may leave now,” she kept her voice warm, even as she dismissed him. “It was brief, but thou gavest me fine service.”

“Take care of yourself, Doll. I’m sure we will see each other again.” Mikael walked from the room, performing the same odd wrist waive as the last time he had left.

Ranni did not say another word, certain the two would never meet again.

Author's Note

Oh boy, oh boy. Where to start with this one?

I sat down to write out the whole of Ranni's part and the words just kept flowing. So much I wanted to do, so little time to do it. I lost sleep over this one and, eventually decided I needed to split it into two chapters at around the 12k word mark.

Ranni herself is just such an interesting character to explore and she had enough dialogue and lore for me to work with. On the one hand, she is responsible for the Night of Black Knives. In a way, she could be the one blamed for the entire game. (Not really true as Marika had a hand in the conspiracy, we just don't know how much.) On the other hand, she clearly cares for her people. She's in hiding but still chooses to protect her mother. Her followers, Iji and Blaidd, know they will not survive but stick with her anyway. I see her as a tricky, lonely woman and I've tried to get that across with this chapter. Expect a more in-depth portrayal of her in the future as I explore her relationship with Mikael.

I was also happy to show how much the character in-game (Mikael in this case) is such an absurd existence to the inhabitants of the Lands Between. Their existence, as a lone agent, completely upends the balance of power. I tried my hand at more fights and I think they turned out alright, all things considered. I am not a fan of fics where characters simply shout out attacks and the strongest wins so I tried to give them some dynamism, let me know how I did.

The next chapter will still be from Ranni's POV because of the split, but we will return to Mikael right after.

DESOLATION IV

He who slowly destroys his own self-esteem,
who does not allow himself to be helped,
who spends days on end complaining about his own bad luck,
about the rain that never stops,
dies slowly.

For the millionth time in weeks, Ranni cursed Seluvis.

When she told him she needed a doll body that would be circumspect and easy to hide, she had not meant she wanted to be the size of an actual doll!

As it was, despite weeks of travel, she had barely made any progress. Her legs were just too short, and she had to pause and hide at the slightest sound of steps. It wouldn't be a problem if the Baleful Shadows were not patrolling the pathway to the Moonlight Altar, where her Two Finger resided. Any magic on her part would draw them as flies to honey. If someone could slay those assassins, she would be able to progress with a full-sized doll.

Once more, Ranni took silent appreciation at the preceptor's fate. Forced to drink one of his own draughts, the puppeteer was now a puppet.

Still, her joy at the irony of the mage's fate did not change the distance she had to travel with her tiny legs.

As the diminutive Demi-god slowly but steadily made her way along Ainsel River, she kept her ears peeled for any sound. Which is why she heard the singing from so far away.

She froze, looking around frantically for a spot to hide. The best option seemed to be a small stone box by the river's shore. The singing was approaching, its sound echoing about the cavern as the words bounced off the walls.

"I'll eat when I am hungry and I'll drink when I am dry,
Get drunk whenever I'm ready, get sober by and by
And if this river don't drown me, it's down I'll mean to roam,
For I'm a river driver and I'm far away from home."

At any other time, Ranni would appreciate the music. It was a shanty of some sort, which wasn't her preference, but the singing and steady rhythm were soothing. The problem was that whoever was singing, virtuoso they might be would attract everything in Ainsel.

She would be discovered!

Without any choice, Ranni relaxed her doll body, rendering it inert. With any luck, the singer would pass her by quickly and draw attention away from her.

After a few minutes, the song ended, though the Demi-god could now hear steps approaching by the displacement of the river stones.

“You are still best boi,” a familiar voice said in a playful tone. Melina’s tarnished. What was he doing here!? “I’m just saying, your claustrophobia is a bit inconvenient sometimes. I get it in buildings and smaller caves, but these underground kingdoms are enormous. Without you, it takes me way too long to make any progress.”

The seal! She had forgotten to redo the seal on the tower after she had entered Renna’s Rise. Anyone could enter behind her!

“When they said this one would be bigger than any of the other games, I didn’t think it would be to this degree.” The tarnished said, his voice very close. Ranni could only pray he would pass her by. No one should ever see her like this, less the name of Ranni the Witch be disgraced. “Whenever I think it can’t get any bigger, Miyazaki goes ‘Watch this!’ and punches me in the dick. The above ground is huge, but it’s doubled if you count the underground kingdoms. By this point, I wouldn’t be surprised if the entire Lands Between is the size of Russia, Canada or even bigger.”

From the angle of her body, Ranni could finally see Mikael. He was walking alone on the other side of the river. Torrent, invisible and intangible, followed behind him. The spectral steed was twitching and looking around constantly. Melina wasn’t visible, which was to be expected, but she assumed the kindling maiden was who the tarnished was talking to.

Careful not to move, Ranni relaxed. Mikael would go by, clear the way, and the rest of her journey would be much smoother after his passing.

Really, the tarnished was her good luck charm.

She should have known that nothing was too absurd for the man who held three shards of the Elden Ring.

“Hm?” His eyes, roaming the cavern as they were, coincidentally fell upon her. “What’s that?”

Paying no heed to the water between them, the tarnished forded the river and approached the miniature Ranni doll.

“Is that?” Despite his wearing a helmet, Ranni could hear the smile in his voice. He picked her up, and she fought to remain still as he manhandled her. “Tini Ranni! This is the greatest thing ever. Of all time. Look, Melina, she has fully functional arms, all four of them. Real kung-fu action! Her tiny hat even comes off!”

Mikael jostled her around, toying with her body like a doll. If this were any other time or place, Ranni would have smote him then and there. Where did he think he was touching?

“Look, it even scowls at you!” The tarnished held her up like a trophy to thin air. More than ever, the Demi-god fought to remain still despite the heresies inflicted on her. If he thought her an odd doll, her reputation was preserved. She hoped this tarnished would tire of toying with her and leave her behind as he continued his journey. “We’re keeping her. What do you think, Tini Ranni?”

The tarnished forced her head to nod.

“It’s unanimous then.” Ranni contemplated her life as she was tucked into a pocket at his hip. Her head was poking out so she could still see, but every once in a while, Mikael pat her head as if reassuring a pet.

Why was life so hard?

“Take me back to my boat on the river
I need to go down, I need to come down
Take me back to my boat on the river
and I won’t cry out anymore.”

At least the music was good.

******

Over the coming weeks, Ranni would learn a lot.

Most irrelevant but traumatic was that Melina and Mikael were… intimate.

Ranni had never seen anything so l-lewd as when they rested for the night. It wasn’t all the time, but when they had a defensible position, the tarnished would set traps, and the kindling maiden would materialize. From there, things would get… steamy. Unable to move, the Demi-god was forced to watch their coupling for fear of discovery.

Ranni had no idea such degeneracy was possible. It was as if Mikael was a never-ending font of perversion. More than once, she was certain Melina would die from the intensity.

Ranni had never been with someone in such a manner, but she knew the basics from her talks with her mother. Just as she knew, it was not supposed to be so… explosive. From what Rennala had imparted upon her, procreation was about emotional fulfillment, and any physical pleasure women felt was largely incidental and up to chance.

Ranni had the urge to project an image of Melina’s eyes rolling back into her head for the sixth time that night at her mother and scream at her, ‘Explain this!’

Despite the… lascivious nature of the occasional nights, Ranni learned just as much

during the days.

Partly because Mikael would just not shut up!

When he wasn't singing, he was babbling about anything and everything. Never something serious, just jokes, comments, foreign words, and profanities.

Ranni had heard more curses in the last few weeks than in the millennia since her birth.

Despite preferring his singing to his talking, Ranni realized something quickly.

It was for the best that Mikael was never silent.

The one time Mikael was silent for any length of time solidified this belief.

He had just finished a ballad about a hero Ranni wasn't familiar with. In the future, she would have to discover who this 'Davy Crockett' was. It would provide clues on where this strange tarnished originated from.

Either way, Ranni hoped he would follow up with another ballad. She preferred those, or songs about love, as they were what she was familiar with due to her time in court. Many had tried to woo the hand of the Carian Princess through music, though none had been as gifted as Mikael.

But Mikael did not start another song, nor did he start talking to himself, Torrent, or Melina.

He remained silent.

For the first hour, Ranni thanked her lucky stars that the only sound was the trickling of the river and the sound of his footsteps upon the shore. Peace and quiet, the companions of her lonely centuries, had been woefully absent for the last few weeks.

After the second hour, she wondered what was engaging his mind for him to remain so eerily quiet. The witch couldn't help but remember the man who fought and killed the Queen of the Full Moon. There were no foes around, hadn't been anything or anyone for three days, so his focus shouldn't be so engaged.

After the sixth hour, Ranni risked a glance upward at her unaware companion. The silence was so out of character for Mikael that Ranni couldn't help her curiosity and took the risk to see if she could glean any clues from his expression.

It was like looking at a corpse.

He wasn't wearing his helmet, the piece of armour dangling at his other side, so the Demi-god could see his features clearly. They remained the same as she had seen in her tower. Golden, draconic eyes. A square jaw with round cheeks. Nose slightly crooked. Dark, wavy hair fell to his shoulders. It was all the same.

If the two faces were put side by side, the one from over a month ago and the one from now, Ranni would have barely been able to call them the same person.

It was like Mikael's entire ego, personality, and disposition had disappeared. His eyes did not shine with amusement, nor did his lip curve in a smirk.

It was as if he was one of Seluvis' puppets, only worse. In those creations, you could still see the hints of who the people had once been. No such indication of former sapience was present in Mikael.

Ranni stared into his eyes and saw… nothing. No mind. No emotion. No will.

She was staring into a yawning void.

The Demi-god decided she preferred his unending comments and jokes to this lifeless abomination.

Thankfully, Mikael was drawn to a stop by Melina eventually. The tarnished had been walking for thirty hours without a word or a moment of rest. He probably would have continued had the kindling maiden not appeared before him.

The woman said nothing, just laying a delicate hand on his chest.

Like a switch had been flipped, light returned to his eyes.

"Thanks," Mikael said softly, placing his hand on hers and leaning in for a small, chaste kiss.

That night's lovemaking was quiet, slow, and intimate.

For the first time, Ranni truly regretted discarding her flesh.

******

No secret lasts forever, and all plots are eventually exposed.

That was a lesson Ranni had learned well over her life. Still, she had hoped that discovery wouldn't come.

One's image was important, after all.

It was the third week after Mikael had found her miniature doll and the day was a shift in the pattern. Rather than set off after awaking, Mikael had left his bags and armour in the alcove he used as a bed last night. Assuming he was simply going to bathe, as he did so regularly, Ranni did not care much.

Then she heard him speaking. Again, him talking to himself was not a rare occurrence, so the witch did not pay it any mind. But as the hours passed and Mikael didn't return, Ranni started to wonder and pay more attention to sounds.

It only took a few minutes before the Demi-god realized the tarnished was talking to someone. Every once in a while, he would pause as if listening to a response. Ranni couldn't hear any other voices, but that wasn't surprising. There were spells to communicate over long distances. Not everyone was skilled or powerful enough for a

complete projection, after all.

The question was, who was he talking to? Someone from the Lands Between? Another faction? Or someone from his mysterious homeland?

Unable to help her curiosity at this unique opportunity, Ranni exited her little pouch and made her way to the alcove's entrance. The spectral form of Torrent was nearby and saw her. She put one of her fingers to her lips to be quiet.

The horse shook its head up and down.

Content with the silence of her co-conspirator, Ranni proceeded towards the river in as stealthy a manner as possible.

"… four or five left. I know where two of them are, but I have no clue where to find the others." Mikael was saying. He was sitting on a boulder, his feet dangling in the stream. The look on his face was one she had never seen before. It was like when he looked at Melina, but it was sad. A melancholy, as if looking at something he couldn't have but dearly wanted. "I've barely explored Altus and haven't even touched the Gelmir mountain range. There is the Capitol as well, and who knows what else. That isn't even counting how large this underground section is or where I am supposed to meet Fia. I still have a long way to go, Robin. Another two decades at least."

Robin. An unfamiliar name. Male or female, she couldn't tell. Though, as she suspected, he was using some sort of spell to communicate. Though Ranni was surprised she couldn't sense the magic.

"Haven't decided," Mikael shrugged at whatever the other person asked. "I don't think I'll stick with Fia and Those Who Live in Death. I've had enough with the undead, thanks. After I get access to Fortissax, I won't need to work with them anymore. That does remind me that I'll need access to the northern mountains and Faram Azula. They both should hold more dragons."

There was a few moments of silence as the tarnished listened to the other person. Eventually, the man shrugged again.

"If nothing else, all this extra time will let you all get the ritual precisely right. It will also allow me to spread my fame further. Give it time to really sink in. We're aiming to take advantage of a lot of technicalities here. I want everything to go perfectly." Mikael turned slightly, staring at something Ranni could not see or sense. "Looks like it's time. Do you mind letting Medea and Yoruichi know that I should have the next batch of blood ready next time? This barrel is almost full."

Mikael stood but suddenly paused. His face suddenly split into a grin, one Ranni recognized as the smile he got when he teased Melina to tears.

"Really?" He asked. "Thanks, I probably wouldn't have noticed for a while."

Sensing that the conversation was winding down, Ranni made to return to her tiny pouch. He would never know she spied on him.

A shadow fell over Ranni, and she froze.

Looking up, the tiny doll's eyes met the draconic yellow. His face set into a teasing grin.

"Well, well, well," the tarnished grabbed her petite form and lifted her to his eye level. "Aren't you a little voyeur? Hello Ranni, how are you enjoying the trip so far?"

Ranni realized quickly she couldn't freeze up here. One of the things she had learned was that if he smelled blood, Mikael would tease poor Melina for hours. Not even astralizing would protect her.

"Is it thy habit to talk to dolls?" She tried to tease back, but his smirk remained vulpine, and Ranni realized that she should have known better than to expect Mikael to be embarrassed about anything. "Fine… Fine. I hadn't expected any soul to recognize me in this guise. How didst thy know?"

"Robin told me. Whenever she's around, she keeps an eye on absolutely everything." The man snickered at his own words as if they contained some joke.

"Now the cat is out the bag," Ranni tossed her hands in the air in frustration. Why couldn't he ever be clear? Still, now the plot was revealed, an opportunity was here. "I cannot allow thee thy freedoms." She had meant that he couldn't tell anyone about her predicament. It hadn't been a threat, merely a lead-in to her offer.

It was the wrong thing to say.

Mikael went still. Nothing physically changes. His eyes remained on her, and his mouth was in that teasing smirk. His muscles did not tense, nor was there any facial twitch.

Despite that, Ranni felt more danger than ever before.

"Oh?" His voice was soft and lilting.

She was going to die. She was going to die. Going to die. Die. die diediediediediediedie.

"I meant to request a boon," Ranni's words tumbled out of her in a rush. She was desperate for that feeling to disappear. Her mortality was something she had only truly faced once before. When she held a fragment of the Rune of Death. "I would ask thee to render me a service."

"Oh?" It was amazing how the same word could be said so differently. The tension left Ranni as his voice returned to its teasing tone, and the feeling of impending doom disappeared.

No more trying to order the man who held three Great Runes and had slain two Demi-

gods.

For a moment, Ranni had been sure she was about to be the third to fall to his hands.

“Within this cavern are the Baleful Shadows,” Ranni explained. “Agents of the Two Fingers. I would ask thee to slay them.”

“Why are they after you?”

“To understand, we would need speak of the past.”

“I’ve got time.” As if to emphasize the point, Mikael sat back down on the boulder and set her on his shoulder.

“Very well,” Ranni looked the tarnished in the eye. He had been very mercenary in his dealings, and she had nothing to offer him for a reward. “I was once an Empyrean. Of the Demi-gods, only I, Miquella, and Malenia could claim that title. Each of us was chosen by our own Two Fingers, as a candidate to succeed Queen Marika, to become the new god of the coming age. Which is when I received Blaidd. In the form of a vassal tailored for an Empyrean.”

“Was he a were-puppy?” Ranni could almost admire how Mikael could sound so serious when asking about something so silly. She didn’t even dignify him with a response.

“But I would not acquiesce to the Two Fingers. I stole the Rune of Death, slew mine own Empyrean flesh, casting it away. I would not be controlled by that thing.” Perhaps Ranni had gotten too invested in the tale as she clenched her tiny fists and declared her defiance passionately. “The Two Fingers and I have been cursing each other ever since… and the Baleful Shadows… are their assassins.”

“Hm,” the tarnished hummed to himself in thought. Ranni stared into his eyes defiantly. Whatever his decision, she had never been ashamed of her actions. Eventually, he answered. “I’ll help.”

A few words that could change her fate once more.

“I have nothing to offer in recompense,” Ranni said softly. Though every fibre of her being urged her not to look a gift horse in the mouth, the

Demi-god had always been fair and open to her companions.

“Don’t need a reward,” Mikael stood, and Ranni easily maintained her position on his shoulder as he entered the alcove and started to gather his things. “If I want to help someone, I’ll help them. If I want to kill them, I’ll kill them. Business is business, but I understand a thing or two about wanting freedom. Whether helping you is a mistake or not is up to me to live with. Freedom is not freedom from consequences, merely learning to live with them.”

“Thou hath my thanks,” she said softly, overcome with a mixture of emotions at his offer of aid. Like a weight had left her soul.

“Now that we will be travelling together, tell me more about Puppy-Blaidd.”

“He has been my companion all my life,” Ranni said in fond melancholy. “Even when I turned my back upon the Two Fingers. Blaidd remained my loyal ally. Heh. Though he was created a vassal for an Empyrean, he was a colossal failure on the part of the Two Fingers.” Though she never had a vast faction, Ranni had always felt blessed to have her companions.

“I had wondered why Iji put him in the Gaol.”

“Blaidd and Iji both… Art willing to give too much to me.” She would probably never see the two again. “Yet they both understand. What lieth beyond the dark path… that I must betray everything and rid the world of what came before.” For a moment, the pair were silent, Mikael understanding that sometimes a joke wasn’t appropriate. Ranni thanked him for that. “Ah, should I add thee to the list? Another one, kind of heart. As kind of heart as they.”

Again there was a beat of silence, though this time Mikael stared at her, eyebrows raised in slight surprise.

Ranni realized what she had just said.

If she could blush, she would.

“Ach, this form hath loosened my tongue.” She pounded her tiny fists against his shoulders ineffectively. “I’ve let slip too much. Forget what thou’st heard. Forget!”

Despite her efforts and flailing, the tarnished laughed.

It was a deep, full-body laugh and Ranni had to hold on lest she fall from her perch. She was not pouting. She wasn’t!

“You’re a tsundere!” Mikael managed to get out in between guffaws. “Or is it a kuudere?”

Ranni stomped her small foot into his shoulder.

She wasn’t either of those!

… Whatever they were.

******

The following few years were some of the happiest Ranni could remember.

Travelling with Mikael, Melina, and Torrent was the closest she had ever come to being free of the constant expectations of a Carian Princess. Things worsened once Radagon became the second Elden Lord, and she was titled a Demi-god.

Here, it was no one but their small band.

The spectral steed was rarely present in the physical form, as he still did not like being

underground. Melina only joined the pair in the evenings and, more often than not, commanded most of Mikael's attention during those times.

Though she was not restricted to inaction anymore, Ranni might have peeked once or twice at their… activities.

For academic purposes only, of course.

Most of the time, it was only Mikael and Ranni, and the pair became incredibly familiar with each other.

Her early life was filled with study, court intrigue, and expectations. Her later years were spent in conspiracy, plots, and loneliness. While the Demi-god had always been close to Iji and Blaidd, they had always been subordinates that looked to her for leadership, and she looked to them for advice.

The only person Ranni had ever been able to confide in had been her mother, and that option had not been available since her 'death'.

Mikael was not a confidant. Whenever the subject got too heavy, he would make a joke or divert the topic. He did not deal in drama, he claimed. He wasn't a subordinate or rival. He wanted nothing from her. Ranni couldn't quite put a term to their relationship, but she treasured it never-the-less.

It also gave her more profound insights into Melina's tarnished.

Despite acting the fool and being ignorant on the strangest of subjects (Who didn't know about the war of the Giants or the nature of the Omen-born?) Ranni found the man incredibly well read and full of unique ideas and philosophies.

The pair had spent days discussing the nature of 'Freedom', 'Fate', 'Self-Determination'. They talked about gods and their place in an Order. Magic was a passion they shared, bouncing ideas off each other.

The sheer breadth of his ideas and knowledge astounded the Demi-god. He was knowledgeable about agriculture, politics, art, business, architecture, psychology, human nature, and dozens of other subjects. Whatever culture he stemmed from, it was highly literate. When asked about it, Mikael smiled fondly.

"My people haven't actually changed in hundreds of thousands of years," he smiled at a joke only he could get. "The only difference between them and me is that I stand atop the shoulders of giants. Great minds came before me, building our knowledge until we reached a tipping point. I grew up with all the information I could ever want a few seconds away. It wasn't without its problems, but it was enough to indulge a young man's curiosity about anything and everything. I've forgotten more than I've learned, but I've learned enough to know more than most. Learning itself was one of my main hobbies."

It showed to those who talked to the man. If he didn't know something? He tried to

deduce the information for himself or ask someone who would know. He was always full of questions about anything and everything. He believed everything, even magic, could be learned through a 'method' of hypothesis, testing, and verification. He wanted to know the cultural traditions of the Carian Family and its history. He was curious about court politics and how the various countries interacted before the Shattering. Most of their time was spent with the Demi-god answering his questions.

In return, he would sing for her.

He sang of love and loss. Of freedom and the sea. He sang of worlds she didn't know, in languages she had never heard. He sang ballads and rhapsodies. No topic was taboo or untouched by his music. Some of his songs were fit for Queen Marika the Eternal, and others shouldn't have been sung even in the seediest of taverns. His voice echoed in hundreds of beats and thousands of tunes around the cavern.

It attracted monsters and the inhabitants of Nokstella.

Mikael sang anthems of war as he killed them.

He indulged her requests as often as he ignored them. Sometimes the mood for a particular genre would take him, and Ranni could do nothing to change his mind.

It wasn't all perfect, and they didn't agree about everything.

No matter how hard she tried, Ranni could not get Mikael to be formal or serious. The closest she achieved was challenging him to prove his ability to do so. He rose to the occasion.

For twenty-four hours, he acted like the perfect courtier. His posture was excellent, his manners were impeccable, and his diction was on point. Ranni had tried everything she could to break the facade, but his behaviour was beyond reproach.

Had he not been in armour, Ranni would have had no problem presenting the man to her mother as a suitor.

As an example, of course.

No other reason.

After the designated time was over, Mikael returned to his usual countenance. His posture relaxed, and he started making inappropriate jokes again. It was like he was a different person entirely.

"I just fake it till I make it." He shrugged when she expressed her incredulity at the change. "I've had to do it enough times that I've gotten really good at faking things like that. It's not separate or disassociated personalities or anything, just a skill someone can train in. Acting proper is actually pretty easy. My mother was raised in a wealthy household and taught me proper manners. It helped a lot in business, as it was a show of status even if I was never actually wealthy."

“They why do thou act like a buffoon?” He could pretend to be a prince if he wanted. If he was going to be Elden Lord, certain comportment was required.

“Because it’s more fun. I know most won’t laugh at my jokes. That’s fine. It’s more for me than anyone else. I know that sarcasm and profanity can make me look bad. I know I am an idiotic man.” Mikael shrugged. Her incredulous look got a chuckle out of him, and he elaborated. “I can act like a businessman in a business environment. I can act servile and accommodating if that is required. I can pretend to be sympathetic, kind, angry, happy, sad, and every other range of emotion in the rainbow. But most of the time, I just don’t care. I care about very little in this world, and unless acting a certain way will help me achieve what I desire, there is no point in putting in the effort.”

“But thy demeanour attracts more enemies than necessary.” Why didn’t he understand how important one’s image was?

“I know,” he nodded his head in agreement but tilted his head in question anyway. “So what? If someone is my enemy, then I kill them. Since I started my journey, I’ve never feared having enemies. I only fear not having enough of them. Life is too boring if I am not working to ruin someone’s life. Remember, if violence isn’t solving your problems, then you are not using enough of it. That, or apply liberal use of fire.”

It was then that Ranni realized what sort of fool Mikael truly was.

He was a tyrant.

A kind yet sadistic tyrant. He would help someone one minute and then destroy an army the next. He revelled in the fight and the slaughter. He teased and prodded at someone’s emotions until they produced a reaction. It was all according to his whim. He knew the consequences of his actions but proceeded anyway.

He didn’t care.

That was the core of Mikael.

Ranni had thought the man to be a man of kind heart and good humour, trusting and trying to make the best of a bad situation. That wasn’t true at all. That good humour and laughing disposition were but another of his masks. His whim just happened to fall upon her side of the equation.

At Mikael’s core was a yawning void of apathy.

When all was silent, and Mikael was alone with his thoughts, and nothing held his interest, he defaulted to who he truly was.

A machine that went through the motions until something sparked his interest.

People he was close to, such as Melina, could shake him from the fugue, but should he be left alone, he would burn the world if the mood took him.

Ranni made the internal decision that the man would never be left alone.

For the world's sake, of course.

Any stimulation, physical or mental, was better than nothing. Good or bad.

Ranni was sure the tarnished would have entered the Lands Between and slain the Demi-gods for the thrill alone had he not already been compelled by his curse.

That was another point that the Demi-god was fascinated by.

Melina's tarnished was cursed to wander the world until he became Elden Lord and freed his eleven companions trapped on a faraway Island. They were only able to visit him once a month, and only he could interact with them, but he was able to send supplies to them.

Had she not seen the items disappear herself, Ranni would have thought the tarnished mad. She was rather put out that she couldn't understand the nature of the magic.

Mikael would cast his spell, his chest glowing a dark red as he said words in a language she couldn't understand and then spend hours talking with them. They could see Ranni even if she couldn't sense them. She had tried to pry the spell from the tarnished, but he remained silent on the subject. He was more than willing to talk about his companions themselves.

Supposedly they weren't that close, only circumstances forcing their interactions as he tried to free them and himself. Before being cursed, he hadn't even met them, though he had heard of them. Supposedly they were figures of myth and legend. Mikael claimed that the Lands Between would have been conquered in a fortnight if they could render aid.

Ranni wasn't sure if she believed that, but it spoke volumes about their strength that he felt most could defeat him, who was the strongest tarnished since Godfrey.

There was so much about Mikael to explore that Ranni hardly noticed the time passing. Her doll could remain active almost indefinitely without the need to cast any spells.

The pair learned, talked, sang, and argued for years on end as the Tarnished explored the ruins of Nokstella.

But all good things must end.

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"I mean, the armour is good, so is the weapon, and the fighting style was similar enough, but nobody familiar with Blaidd would believe this was him," Mikael poked the corpse with his sheathed blade. "It's clearly a mask. Blaidd drools a lot, and this guy's 'tongue' wasn't even moving or panting. Four out of ten stars."

Ranni stared at the Two Finger's assassin. The object of fear and defiance for centuries

of her life.

It had not even lasted a minute against Mikael's skill at violence. The tarnished had not even needed to cast a spell, just pure blade work to slay one of the boogeymen of the Lands Between.

Her path was suddenly clear.

Nothing stood between her and the Two Fingers who sought to dictate her fate.

So why was there a pit in her stomach?

Why did she feel like crying?

"You alright, Doll?" Mikael had paused his prodding of the corpse and had turned to her. She had been in a pouch during the fight but had climbed back to her regular place atop his shoulder once the foe had been slain. "You've been quiet for a bit. Any other shadows I should be aware of?"

"Nay," Ranni continued to stare at the body. She didn't want to look at those expressive eyes. Draconic yellow should never be a soothing colour. "This was the last."

It was time to go.

On her long and lonely journey.

She stood on his shoulder, channelling magic for the first time in years.

"Beautifully fought." The miniature doll fell inert to the floor as her soul left it. Her spectral form was visible to the tarnished, though she continued to look away. "My thanks. 'Twas less of a challenge than I envisioned. Now I can finally stand before them."

"Ranni?" Mikael asked, his voice was tinged with concern.

The Demi-god didn't know why he would be worried. She had made sure her voice hadn't cracked and remained calm.

"Before I take my leave, I must ask of thee one question that has plagued my mind for many a year." She could feel him approach behind her. Thankfully, he stopped before reaching her front. Her spiritual body could not remain expressionless as her dolls were.

It wouldn't do for Mikael's last memory of Ranni the Witch to be tainted by her tears.

"Sure."

"When thou approached my mother in her library, what was your intent?" She didn't know if the answer would make her feel better or worse.

"To kill her, of course." Mikael remained as shameless as ever, utterly unrepentant of his murderous intent. "I could grab the Great Rune from the amber afterwards."

"Then why did thy not slay her when my spell failed?" That was the real question she had been wondering. Why had, after almost dying, Mikael spared Rennala?

There was a beat of silence.

"I had heard of her before I reached Raya Lucaria." His voice was calm, though tinged

with a sentiment Ranni couldn't identify. Wistfulness, perhaps? "A betrayed and heartbroken woman. Turtle Pope painted a vivid picture of who she once was and what she had become. I've learned in my years that death can be a better alternative than wasting away in loneliness. I figured I might as well put her out of her misery when I had the chance."

"But what stayed thy hand?" Ranni had guessed as much from her time with the tarnished. He was a deeply scarred person for all that he played the fool.

"You did," he said simply. Ranni could imagine him shrugging in that unconcerned manner of him. "I went there expecting to find a heartbroken woman who had been left behind by the world. I found a mother whose children still cared enough about her to defend against a man who had slain a Demi-god. When someone dies, there are always two affected parties. The dead, of course. But they are the least affected. They are beyond their worries. It is those left behind that are the real victims."

Ah, there was that odd viewpoint of his. That mind could revel in slaughter but would stay his blade against a woman so the daughter who tried to kill him wouldn't cry. He had professed more than once that he liked 'happy endings'.

"This is farewell, my dear." The last word slipped from her mouth unbidden. She did not look at him as her form disappeared. If she did, she would never leave. "Tell Blaidd and Iji… I love them."

She reappeared in one of her lifesize dolls held in her storage far from where Mikael now stood. Its face was utterly expressionless.

Ranni sat there for hours, calming down.

It would not do to stumble on the last step due to her chaotic emotions.

Once she was ready, Ranni stood. Despite a yawning void in her heart, she knew she was doing the right thing.

She just wished that it didn't hurt so much.

As she set out for the final confrontation with the enemy that had pursued her for centuries, Ranni wondered what had possessed her to leave that key behind. The key that she had sworn never to give anyone.

Perhaps she was praying that Mikael would deliver her one last miracle.

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Ranni sat atop the rotting carcass of her hated foe. She had not moved for who knew how long.

She was finally free.

Free to decide her own fate.

Free to rid the world of Order and the corruption it wrought.

So why was everything so dull?

Ranni did not care about the image she was presenting.

The blood of the Two Fingers caked the room and her body. Her clothes were taters, and much of her doll had been shattered in the fight. The image of the Carian Princess was long gone; she looked more like one of Mikael's victims.

The thought of the tarnished sent a familiar twinge of pain through her.

It wasn't enough to get her to move.

Ranni knew she should be preparing for her journey. If not, then at least rest to recuperate. She knew there was no rush, but she had always been one to do what she could when she could.

It was hard to find the motivation to even sleep, let alone try and change the world.

It all seemed so… pointless now.

No, not pointless.

Ranni admitted to herself that she was scared.

Solitude and loneliness were not new to her, but the prospect of that long, dark journey beyond the stars terrified her. She would be alone for eternity if everything went to plan. Order would never again fall into the hands of those who would twist it.

The thought of that chill night was suddenly frightening enough to suck all will from her spirit.

The death of the Two Fingers would not go unnoticed, and someone was bound to attempt to hunt her and her faction down.

The Demi-god hoped Blaidd and Iji were alright.

Many foes would be hunting her faction in earnest, whether it be one of her siblings, Marika's Black Knives, or even the other agents of the Greater Will.

She wished Mikael was here.

No doubt he would say something stupid. Maybe he would sing her a song of triumph. Perhaps he would tease her until her emotions overtook her doll again.

Maybe he would simply hold her.

As he sometimes had Melina in the cold dark nights.

So Ranni sat there, in the dark and covered in the blood of the Two Finger.

Time seemed to lose all meaning as she attempted to find the will to set out on her path.

Perhaps she would have stayed there for centuries, unable to muster the energy to get out of bed. Once more, one particular tarnished stuck his nose into her affairs.

“You know there’s a process to these things,” a teasing voice lured Ranni’s mind to her doll once more.

Though its eye was open, the witch could not understand what her doll saw. Was she dreaming again? She had imaginings like this.

Mikael kneeled, a pale blue ring in one of his hands while another held up her top right hand. One of only two undamaged from the battle.

“Asking someone to marry you is usually more involved than dropping a key at their feet.” He slid the Dark Moon Ring onto her ring finger in a smooth motion. “You’re lucky Rennala wanted to tease her new son-in-law, or I would have no idea what this little thing meant. You are also fortunate that I am currently in between factions. Could be a conflict of interest, you know? Marrying a Demi-god and trying to be neutral to the others.”

Ranni, in a daze, lifted her hand to her eyes. A blue gem, reminiscent of a full moon, reflected an image of a bloody doll.

“More than anything, you are lucky that Melina doesn’t care who I back for god. Besides, I made the offer to her. There’s barely a difference between twelve and thirteen anyway.”

By the Erdtree, she must look terrible!

With what power she retained, Ranni destroyed her doll body. She was careful to shift the ring first, of course. She had conjured the last doll from her storage in less than five seconds. It was in much better shape, and she reappeared before Mikael.

It had taken all the power she could channel, and she would need to rest for years, but at least Ranni was now presentable before her consort.

Her consort. Hehe.

“It was thee, who would become my Lord,” Ranni said, controlling her doll so that no emotion showed on its face. Image was important, after all. There was no controlling the happiness in her voice, though.

“I would hope so since you gave me the key to the ring. Otherwise, I will have to have a very awkward talk with your mother.” Ranni was never happier to hear his irreverent tone. “Though if you are unhappy, I hear there is a lonely widow in a library that could use my company. I’m sure she could comfort a heartbroken man, especially if her daughter was the cause of my anguish. Two betrayed people, finding love again. It would make a fine tale.”

Nevermind.

Mikael was as insufferable as ever.

“I am pleased.” Best to head him off before he got really going. As it was, fatigue was catching up with the Demi-god. She had a few things to do before she slumbered. Ranni

knew just where she wanted to go to rest. “Thou’rt a fitting choice. I have but one duty left before I depart.”

“Leaving already?” Mikael looked surprised for a bit before hiding it under an unconcerned facade. “We just got engaged, Doll. This calls for a celebration. I was going to go full degenerate. I’m talking moonlit walks, hugs, picnics in a field of wildflowers, the whole nine yards. Even unprotected handholding if you were feeling particularly raunchy.”

It was hard not to smile at Mikael’s spew of nonsense after so long a period of silent loneliness.

It was okay, though. The pair would have all the time they wished for as they travelled the stars.

Together.

“I bequeath this to thee.” Ranni allowed the Dark Moon Greatsword to fall from her storage and impale the corpse of the Two Fingers. It was the traditional dowry for those who would wed Carian Princesses.

She never thought to need it.

Something about the moonlit blade must have shocked Mikael because he stared at the weapon, mouth slightly open. Ranni would love nothing more to ask what had him so surprised, but she was running out of time.

“I go now, to the night sky. It is there I shall find mine order.” She said the words in somewhat of a rush. She had to get the words out quickly, or Mikael would recover from his surprise and ask questions she didn’t have time to answer. “I bid thee travel the path of the Lord. And once all is done, we shall see each other, once more.”

Mikael looked to her, then to the sword, and let out a deep, belly-full laugh.

Ranni took the opportunity to dissipate her current doll body into storage and flowed into the other receptacle she sensed nearby. The Miniature Ranni held in a pouch at the tarnished’s waist.

As the world grew hazy, Ranni heard Mikael speak softly.

“Aah, you were at my side all along. My guiding moonlight…”

Ranni smiled in her sleep.

She liked the sound of that.

Her consort’s guiding moonlight.

******

Ranni slept for years.

She slept as the tarnished explored the Moonlight Altar, Altus, and Leyndell. She barely stirred as Mikael fought the ancient dragon Lansseax.

The Demi-god trusted her consort to emerge triumphant over all foes.

Ranni barely managed to muster the energy to watch Mikael and Melina, fighting side by side for the first time, slay the Omen King at the foot of the Erdtree.

For a moment, the Demi-god feared that Mikael would stand before the Elden Ring before she had recovered enough for the journey.

Thankfully the pair were rebuffed by a wall of thorns, giving Ranni more time to recuperate as they set off to find a way around the barricade.

The cold of the Mountaintop of the Giants did not affect her doll body, though she did note the temperature change. Moments of lucidity came more frequently, and Ranni could watch Mikael slay the Great Wyrm that had once been Theodorix. She watched him invade Castle Sol and kill Commander Niall.

Ranni finally awoke in time to observe Mikael, charging atop Torrent, combat the last of the Fire Giants. While he kept Moonveil at his hip, the Demi-god felt joy seeing him wield the Dark Moon Greatsword.

The knight fought the Giant upon his noble steed like a tale from her youth.

Unlike the legends, the knight was anything but noble.

“Come on, my grandma could aim better than that!” Mikael taunted the Giant as he dashed past, greatsword flashing to hamstring the being. The titan stumbled, falling to one knee. The tarnished avoided the flames deftly as he steered Torrent away from the Giant’s roll. He seemed not to care about the heat, the snow melting into slush around the battle. “I mean, I started bigger fires in school! You aren’t even trying, are you?”

Perhaps it was frustration at being unable to hit his comparatively tiny foe that angered the Fire Giant.

Maybe, the wounds had accumulated enough that the red titan feared for his life.

More than likely, Mikael had just pissed it off with his words enough that the Fire Giant was willing to do anything to get him to close his mouth.

Ranni smiled to herself in the pouch. Her consort could have that effect on people.

No matter the reason, the behemoth was angry enough to take drastic measures. In a shower of gore, the massive being tore its leg from its knee socket. Lifting its appendage to the sky, the Fire Giant roared.

It’s Fell God answered, the great eye opening upon the titan’s chest as fire covered the mountaintop.

Ice flowed from Mikael’s mouth to combat the flames. Once the conflagration died, far from being intimidated by the display, Ranni could hear the smirk in her consort’s voice.

“That is a big glowing weak spot if I’ve ever seen one.” He urged the Spirit Steed forward.

What followed was as impressive as it was inevitable.

The tarnished continued to taunt the Fire Giant, dealing only glancing blows as he masterfully dodged both flame and fist. He danced around the titan for minutes, waiting for his chance to strike.

Mikael’s opportunity came when the behemoth, using its flaming leg as an improvised weapon, overextended its swing.

Torrent jumped over the appendage, landing below the stomach of the last Giant. The Fell God glared balefully at Mikael as he launched himself skyward, clad in the purple lightning of gravity magic.

The Dark Moon Greatsword impaled the massive eye. The weapon glowed sparkling blue for a moment before an explosion of magic showered her consort in fluids.

“Wooooo,” despite his gruesome state, Mikael let out a crow in triumph. He never hit the ground, Torrent forming below him. The pair dashed off as the Fire Giant crumbled to the ground behind them. “Call me David because Goliath got nothing on me!”

Ranni actually understood his words.

It was a legend from her consort’s homeland, one of those stories he had shared during their years together.

With its guardian dead, nothing stood between Mikael and the Forge.

Ranni felt the pit of her stomach fall as she realized what that meant.

Oh no.

She considered saying something as her consort rode toward the great cauldron holding the Giant’s Flame.

But what could she say?

As far as she knew, the only other option than the coming tragedy was something Melina would not abide by.

Maybe… Maybe Mikael had one more miracle in him. Perhaps he had something that could give him and Melina the happy ending he had secured for Ranni.

“Hm,” Mikael looked over the rim of the great cauldron. “Big tub. Really Miyazaki, what is with your fetish for burning people? Who hurt you?”

Melina appeared beside Ranni’s consort as he started to strip his armour. Both women stared at the man in surprise as he removed his shirt, not minding the cold.

“What are you doing?” Melina pressed a hand to Mikael’s chest, stopping his disrobing.

“Taking a hot bath,” he deadpanned at the woman. “What’s it look like I’m doing? I

imagine the process goes something like this; get set on fire, carry fire to tree, light tree on fire, thorns go bye-bye, profit. This won't be the first time I've done something like this."

While her consort had the right idea, the execution was wrong.

Anyone who was burned by these flames would not be coming back.

Someone was needed to channel the flames to the Erdtree, he was correct about that, but only a god could survive the fire of the Fell God. For all his strength, Mikael was not a god. As a tarnished, he wouldn't remain dead but be stuck in a perpetual state of burning to death and rebirth.

Neither of the women present would allow that to happen.

"Are you so ready to commit a Cardinal Sin? I have long observed that the Lands Between are in dire need of repair… of Death indiscriminate. What we do here shall change the world. Are you prepared?"

"You know me," Mikael hugged her tightly, smirking down at her. "I love me some sinning. The more sins, the merrier. I don't feel right if I haven't blasphemed twice before breakfast."

Melina let out a wet chuckle, leaning close to her lover.

"Hey," Mikael looked down at Melina. His draconic yellow eyes radiated both comfort and confidence. "Trust me. I'm no stranger to being burned. This will be nowhere near the worst I've dealt with." He leaned down to kiss Melina to reassure her.

They held that kiss for a moment, and Ranni sensed the soporific spell form.

Mikael stumbled backwards, falling to one knee as his eyelids drooped. He stared up at his companion in confused betrayal for a moment, uncomprehending what had just happened.

Then fear overtook his features.

"'on't you 'areee!" Mikael's voice slurred as he tried to resist the point-blank spell. "Ah can do iiittttt. I 'an…"

Her consort collapsed to the ground face first.

Melina stared at the man, then approached his sleeping form.

Slowly and carefully, she set him on his back, placing his discarded clothes under his head as a pillow. She covered his half-naked form in her cloak, tucking it under him so he wouldn't feel the cold of the mountain top.

Melina sat beside the sleeping man, hands combing through his hair. Torrent appeared beside the pair. The spectral steed set himself on Mikael's other side, leaning over to nuzzle the maiden's head.

"I must tender my thanks to you too, Torrent. Thank you for bringing us together. Please continue to lend him your aid. Till the end. He will need it. I do not wish him to be

lonely.” Melina turned back to the sleeping man.

“I wanted to keep travelling with you,” the woman said. Tears flowed from her eye as she stared down at Mikael. “I hoped Marika would grant us access. I never wanted this. I wanted to visit your Island and meet your companions. I wanted to see your home. I wanted to see you become Lord.” The maiden paused, choking back a sob.

“I know you will. This won’t stop you. Nothing will. I know you’ll be free one day. I am just sorry I won’t be there to see it. You, who delivered me my own freedom. I do this of my own volition. Regardless of my mother’s designs. I have set my heart upon the world I would have. One in which you are Lord.”

Melina stood, leaving her lover behind as she approached the lip of the cauldron.

“He will never forgive thee,” Ranni couldn’t help but speak up. She knew this was needed, but it didn’t change the fact it would hurt Mikael. “My consort will never forget nor forgive. He is a petty man like that.”

“I’ll entrust his heart to you, Lady Ranni.” Power channelled from the kindling maiden, and the flames engulfed the woman. “His companions claim to love him. I ask you to ensure they speak the truth. He has been hurt enough.”

“I will,” she promised. It wasn’t surprising that her consort had consorts of his own. She had long known Mikael would never leave Melina and wasn’t surprised there were others. Ranni would defend him from any leaches. It was the least she could do in memory of the woman who paved the way for her Lord.

“My thanks,” Melina turned from Mikael and stared defiantly at the sky. The flames rose with her will. “O Erdtree, you shall burn. Burn for the sake of the new Lord.”

The pyre rose, reaching the sky and the leaves that blanketed it.

The burning woman turned to her lover for a final time.

“Thank you. For guiding me here. For loving me. For everything. Good-bye.”

And then Melina was gone.

All that was left was ash on the wind.

Ranni conjured her full-sized doll and sat beside her consort. She placed his head upon her lab, running her hands through his hair as he tossed and turned in fitful sleep.

Torrent lay close, providing what warmth he could to the pair as they watched the sky burn.

Author's Note:

… I won't say much here just three things.

1. This was the easiest and hardest chapter I've written yet. The words flowed out of me in a torrent and this is my longest chapter yet. I spent more time revising this than writing it. I am still not sure I conveyed what I wanted to.

2. The end of this chapter and the next, when we return to Mikael's POV, mark the lowest this story is going to get. It is needed to get the character where I need him to be, but I am happy to say that the dawn will come after the darkest part of the night. If anyone wants to wait for Volume 1 to finish and 2 to start (where the wish fulfillment (and smut) really kicks in) I won't blame them.

3. Those of you who have paid attention to the story, will know I like happy endings. For all the characters I can give.

I'll see you all next week.

DESOLATION V

When we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years,
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss;
Truly that hour foretold
Sorrow to this.

I would rather trust you, than simply continue to spoil from within.

I loved fire.

I hated fire.

Some of my earliest memories are of flame.

Some of my happiest memories are sitting before a hearth, book in hand.

But fire burns more than it comforts.

I had burned in the fires of the gods twice.

Staring at the orange and red sky, the Erdtree crackling in the fires of its own Ragnarok, I wished I had burned thrice.

I was numb.

When you experience something like this, it feels like you are floating. Like everything is separated by a filter. Like nothing is real. Like you are dreaming. I knew enough about medicine to know I was in shock.

In a way, I was fortunate.

I had lived for centuries in worlds created from the mind of Hidetake Miyazaki. A series famous for its slogan; Prepare to Die. That same slogan had been, appropriately, changed by the fandom.

Prepare to Cry.

That I only felt like this now was nothing short of a miracle.

There were no happy ends in Demon Souls, Dark Souls, Bloodborne, or Sekiro.

Anyone the player interacted with was doomed. The kindest thing someone could do in those worlds was to stay away from the NPCs.

Intellectually, I knew I had done a lot. Secured happy ends for a lot of people I liked. Rationally, I knew I should be proud of the happiness I had secured for others.

Feelings never care for logic.

Though Fromsoft had a way of breaking its players' hearts, I had thought they still

had a few lines they never crossed. They never separated gameplay from their storytelling. This meant that if you only had one way to level up, they shouldn't take it away for cheap drama.

I hear we have to set the tree alight? Obviously, the player needs to burn to accomplish it, just like in Dark Souls. There is more than one puzzle in those games involving lighting fires. Though there had been mentions of sacrificing a maiden, I hadn't given Shabiri much time to talk before killing him for possessing Yura.

More than that, I hadn't believed him.

What were they going to do? Take away the players' ability to level up before the end of the game? I had needed Melina to level up in the first place; it made no sense to take her away.

I would still be able to channel runes, even after Melina… left.

I had thought it was due to my Talents, a workaround not available to players.

I should have realized that nothing was safe.

I never played Elden Ring. I had avoided any information from the network test. I knew nothing about the world but the bare basics shown in the trailers.

For all I knew, this was but one path.

If I had joined other factions, would Melina still be alive?

If I had explored, researched, and spent more time in Reya Lucaria or Leyndell, could I have saved her?

If I had trusted her more and given her more information, would she still be with me?

I would rather trust you, than simply continue to spoil from within.

I offered her my bite, but I had not explained everything.

I told her my 'curse' was transferable if I wished it. Those people got a host of benefits in exchange for being trapped on the Island until I could free them. It would mean only as much as they wished it to mean.

Though they were 'bound' to me, it didn't mean they had to do what I said or go where I went. Unlike other waifu-catalogue-bound people, there was no requirement for romance. Theoretically, I could offer the benefits of the catalogue to anyone; I didn't even have to be attracted to them.

Even Ranni, despite our 'marriage', I was only going to make the offer to her because I sympathized with her plight, and I felt she would enjoy the company of the women of the Island.

I still planned on leaving them all, only taking Melina with me. They could go where they wished from there.

My maiden would have let me wade into that cauldron if she had known I had burned

in the fires of the First Flame. She would have trusted me to return to her, I was sure.

We were waiting for me to become Elden Lord before I bound her, as she would disappear like Priscilla had. When she had first told me she loved me, I had been terrified she would disappear. But I now knew the only method of binding that worked was my bite. Like everything else regarding that accursed catalogue, nothing worked as it should.

Not that I told her that.

I didn't tell her about the possibility that she could control me once bound.

I hadn't explained the true extent of my 'curse'.

Melina knew nothing of the other worlds, my 'super-immortality' or the true extent of my madness.

There was a myriad of reasons, some petty and others valid, but it all came down to one thing.

I hadn't trusted her.

I hadn't trusted her to not use her power over me once she knew about it. I believed our relationship would change once she knew she could shape me with only her words.

In my ideal world, I would have beaten the game and claimed all the shards of the Elden Ring. I would bind Melina and Ranni, enact my plan, and appear on the Island. From there, I would gain control of my Dragon Body, grab my stuff and Melina, and leave.

No temptation to stay, no risk of death by personality wipe or being a puppet in my body.

It was a simple plan.

But this wasn't my ideal world.

Melina was dead because I hadn't trusted her.

Because I had been scared.

I would rather trust you, than simply continue to spoil from within.

I had wondered why Millicent's words had bothered me so much when I heard them. They were said in such an off-handed manner. They shouldn't have stuck with me for so long.

I thought it was because I feared rotting from within, from losing myself in my search for freedom. That wasn't the reason.

A part of me had realized I had long rotted away.

Maybe since I first discovered their power over me?

When I found out that they were going free Emma and she hadn't told me?

Certainly, since I decided to cast a command seal at every summoning, fear has driven me to control them rather than risk a slip of the tongue. I had gone so far as to give the order in french, lest Melina or Ranni suspect something.

If that didn't speak of my paranoia, I didn't know what did.

Even if I had forgotten most of my interactions with them over the centuries, even if I couldn't claim to love them, I knew them enough by now to know they didn't harbour malicious intent.

Even if I knew that, even now that my actions had driven my lover to death, I didn't know if I could trust them or anyone else who could unmake me with an order.

Such was the nature of fear.

Cold and overpowering in its complete control.

It was too late anyway.

The kindling had been burnt to ash, and there was no getting it back.

What was the point of trust when those you wanted to let into your heart were already gone?

I stood up.

My eyes were dry.

I never liked crying.

I had things to do.

"Mikael," a soft voice called my name.

Ranni was sitting where I had just been lying. Torrent was beside her.

How long had they been there?

No matter. I had things to do.

"You stole the Rune of Death." It wasn't a question. She had admitted as much decades ago when we met in her tower.

"I did," she answered, standing up and looking in my eyes. She barely came up to my navel, but her piercing blue eye stared through me.

I looked away. I didn't want sympathy.

Not when I could have stopped this from happening in the first place.

"Then you know where I can find it." Torrent rose as well, and I started to redon my armour.

"Tis held by Maliketh the Black Blade. He hides in Crumbling Faram Azula."

I fumbled at the clasp of my chest piece. I hadn't expected Ranni to give the information so freely. I had expected to have to trade something for it. Let her know she owed me for that Baleful Shadow. I briefly wondered about her angle before I realized I didn't care.

If she was being helpful, that was all that mattered. The motivation was irrelevant.

"Good, you'll take me there." I stared down at Melina's cloak. It was all I had left of her besides memories. I carefully folded it and put it away. "Once I control Destined

Death, I'm going after the Elden Ring."

"Which of my siblings in thy target?"

"All of them," I finally met her eye. She should leave now if she couldn't get behind me, killing her family. I would find my own way. "Rykard, Malenia, Miquella, and Mohg. I'm going to find them and kill them all. I'm not going near the Erdtree until they are dead, and I'm holding their shards in my hand. Then I'll kill Radagon and anyone else that gets in my way. Probably Marika, too, unless she has a good reason for those thorns."

"Very well, my consort." Far from being put off by my words, Ranni just nodded her head. "I shall render what aid I can upon thy journey. Rykard should be our first target, lest his Manor takes advantage of the Capitol's state. The others may be found at thy leisure."

I grunted in acknowledgment as I mounted Torrent.

Ranni sat behind me.

Phantom feelings of Melina's arms embracing me as we rode through the world.

I shuddered, and the feelings were gone.

I needed to kill something.

Right now, nothing sounded better than fighting, killing, and dying in turn.

I wasn't masochistic in the least, always leaning more towards the sadistic side, but right now physical pain sounded much better than what I was feeling now.

I knew that taking out my pain on others was wrong. After I had the Rune of Death, I could set out to Leyndell and end it all. The women on the Island had the ritual all set up already. They were just waiting on my say-so.

What I was going to unleash on the Lands Between was senseless, pointless violence.

I never pretended to be a good man, but what I would do in the coming years would be morally and ethically wrong on every level.

I just didn't care.

******

"A moment, my consort," Ranni's voice stopped me in my tracks.

I didn't ask what for.

She had been incredibly helpful since Melina… since she left. She couldn't use too much magic in her miniature form, but if needed she could shift to her larger doll. That was how I had reached Faram Azula. She had cast a teleportation spell of some sort.

Without her, I would have spent decades searching for access to the ruins of the flying city.

Her spectral form flowed from the pouch at my side in a haze of blue magic reminiscent of twinkling stars. She wasn't looking at me, instead staring at the storm at the center of the crumbling fortress.

At any other time, Faram Azula would have captured my heart instantly. I would have watched the powerful storm for hours, captivated by its size and majesty.

I just wanted to find Maliketh and every dragon here and kill them all. Most did not actually increase my power, already saturated with draconic energy as I was. Still, a rare few gave me good enough benefits that hunting the rest was worth the effort. Rather than partaking in communion, when I consumed their hearts, I got flashes of their memories and, from there, could recreate their unique spells.

"A great spell has been woven here," Ranni's voice was steady as always. For a moment, I was tempted to tease her about it. I always liked that I could prod her until she broke her facade. But it was just an idle thought. I didn't feel like talking. So I just grunted at her words. "I would ask thee to hold still for a while. I believe I have found an ingress to a hidden abode. Perhaps Maliketh has moved his residence since I stole Death." She paused for a moment, looking at me.

"What?"

"Should I do this, I shall need to rest. Neither this working nor that of bringing thee here were of little effort. Even my larger forms may only channel so much power."

"Do it," I said as I sat down and watched her work.

Even with my Magical Talent and experience with spells, I could barely tell what Ranni was doing. While it was powerful, more than that, it was subtle. I recognized a temporal and spatial aspect and the similarities to the spell Ranni had used to teleport me to Faram Azula years ago.

With my experience with Fromsoft games, it wasn't hard to guess what was coming.

My assumption was proven right when time flowed backwards, like pressing rewind on a VHS.

The storm shrunk as debris flew back into place. Pillars rebuilt themselves, and the floor evened out. In less than a minute, I had gone from sitting at the edge of a skyborne wreck, legs dangling off the edge, to standing in a colossal arena.

"'Tis done," I could hear the weariness in Ranni's voice. If she was so diminished while bodyless, I wondered how strong she had been when she had her Emperyan flesh. "T'was not the home of the Black Blade. This is Dragonlord Placidusax. Elden Lord in the age before the Erdtree. I believed he was slain when his god fled. Though he has suffered wounds, he lives still."

I watched the absolutely massive being unfurl his wings as he sensed the intrusion

into his home. I could see the inspiration from DnD's Tiamat, though only two of the five heads remained. Judging by the power gathering in their maws, it was the two that controlled fire and lightning.

"I am sorry, my consort," Ranni said, flowing back into her miniature housing at my waist. I didn't know why she sounded so sad. "My magic has drained me, and I must rest a while. Thee will be alone in this fight."

Torrent, we had discovered, on top of being claustrophobic, was also acrophobic. Without best boi, this would be a challenge.

Just me and an ancient dragon lord.

Perfect.

"Get some rest, Doll." I absentmindedly patted the tiny head. It was a habit from years of our time together. She had never once complained about it, and it had become a habit. "By the time you wake up, I should be done with Faram Azula. Maybe Gelmir as well."

"My consort," I could hear the fatigue in her voice and the concern. I kept an eye on the Legend in front of me as it roared in a challenge at me. "Perhaps thee should… nay, I shall not say it. I shall simply urge thee to remember, I am here. Thou are not alone."

Then it was just me, my greatsword, and a dragon the size of a skyscraper.

******

I took a deep breath, golden lightning and fire gathering in my maw. The ice decorating the cavern covered the rancid stench that had been present when I first entered.

When I had first purchased Inexaustable Talent, I had dreamed of casting spells that reshaped the world. I firmly believed there was a small piece of everyone that longed for the wonders of magic. I hoped to conjure storms, meteors, and other astonishing phenomena.

Throughout my journey, I discovered two limitations that stopped my dreams in their tracks.

The first was the limit of the power my vessel could draw on.

Whenever I started a new game, I was reset to level one, and even if I never ran out of magic, there was a limit to how much I could channel at any point. In game terms, my magic bar never lowered, but if it wasn't large enough, I couldn't cast more powerful spells. It was only as I approached the last few boss fights that I was really able to go all out. But then I would run into the second problem.

Magic in the Souls games, and Elden Ring, isn't fast enough to cast.

It held incredibly destructive power, and more often than not, I could jerry-rig something, but I was rarely able to use it to its full potential. Enemies wouldn't just sit there and let you cast at them. Radahn was a great example. I had to risk my life to literally be on top of him to get the full effect of Ekzykes Decay.

So I relished the few opportunities I had to go all out.

Even better when my enemy was a Demi-god holding a shard of the Elden Ring.

I immediately sensed the powerful weapon nearby when I entered the massive cavern that housed the God-Devouring Serpent. The wind magic coated its blade and told me it was another take on the Stormruler fight like Yorm or the original in Demons' Souls.

I didn't need it.

Seeing as the massive snake was at home in a volcano, I hazard a guess that it was resistant to fire and wasn't used to ice.

Borealis's Mist flowed from my mouth in an unending torrent, hiding me from view. The lava cooled and solidified. Bodies froze, then shattered in shows of frozen blood. Ice formed on the floor, walls and ceilings.

The serpent stirred, trying to find me in the fog, but its massive size gave away its location, and I avoided it with ease even as the temperature continued to lower. I didn't know if a blasphemous snake god was cold-blooded, but it barely took half an hour for its writhing to slow, then stop.

I kept the power flowing from my mouth.

I knew things wouldn't be so simple with a critical Fromsoft boss.

I was unsurprised to see an arm burst from the serpent's body, the frozen blood flying in icicles as its scales shattered.

What was with Elden Ring and all the arms and hands?

Did Miyazaki discover the wonders of handjobs since Sekiro?

I watched the arm reach into the limp maw of the God-Devouring Serpent and withdraw a massive greatsword covered in pulsing and writhing tendrils.

Ok, I can give props to the spectacle.

It didn't change what I was doing.

The temperature continued to drop, well below zero and reaching the point where even I was feeling it.

And I was casting spells to heat myself up.

My 'fight' with Rykard was anti-climatic.

He tried everything the snake had, rampaging around the cavern in an attempt to find me. He swung his blade to and fro, screaming about how I would 'join his family', and we would 'devour the gods'. He tried to use his own magic to fling fire and lava around, but

by then, the temperature was so low and my breath so powerful that lava turned to stone in his hands, and flames extinguished into steam in seconds.

With three shards of the Elden Ring, my Inexaustable Talent, and a battlefield I had set up? The result was inevitable.

I enjoyed a blood-pumping fight more than most. The knowledge that certain death was a miss-step away brought me to life like few things could. I would fondly look back on my time against the Ornstein and Smough, Alonne, Nameless King, Gael, the Soul of Cinder, and Radahn. They were some of the best moments of my life.

But the sadistic joy I found in slow freezing a Demi-god as he helplessly tried to save himself, unable to put up even a token resistance, was close to that adrenaline rush.

In the end, I gathered the shard of the Elden Ring from the popsicle of Rykard, Lord of Blasphemy.

I shattered his body into billions of pieces with Placidusax's Ruin. The 'fight' took an hour. I spent six in that cavern.

Over and over, I breathed a golden rush of lightning and fire upon the carcass until all that remained was an ash-filled crater.

The serpent god would not be coming back from that.

I didn't leave loose ends.

******

The by now familiar smell of the Scarlet Rot filled my nose. It was joined by the iron tang of blood.

I looked at the source of both.

"Thank you for lending your hand," Millicent stared up at me with vacant eyes. She was as pale as the first time we met. Again I was struck by the beautiful deep scarlet of her hair. I always had a thing for red-heads. "Without your help, I could not have defeated that quartet."

"'s no problem," I said softly. I was concentrating my inexhaustible power on trying to heal her wounds. She hadn't escaped that fight without taking a blade through the chest, near her heart. It was taking all I could to keep her alive. The wounds were not closing, no matter how much of the miracle flowed through me and into her. "Don't talk. You're making my job harder."

"I feel as if I've been in your debt from beginning to end." What was with these women and not listening to me? "Thank you. With your help, I was able to live as my own person, if only in passing."

“I do this of my own volition. Regardless of my mother’s designs. I have set my heart upon the world I would have.”

“That’s quitter talk,” I tried to smile at her. Even I knew it looked more like a grimace. “You’ve made it this far. Just a little more, and I can heal you.”

“This is where things end.” Goddamnit woman! Shut up, and let me fix you! I wasn’t going to lose anyone else. “I pause to even tell you, but… I took out the needle myself.”

I froze, power still seeping out of me.

“Why?” I’m sure my voice sounded pathetic.

“Whoever started this and provided you with the needle, tell them; that if I am to flower into something other than myself, I would rather rot into nothingness as I am.”

Though she couldn’t see me, too Rot-infested, I could see the determination in her eyes. Stupid hard-headed woman.

I would rather trust you, than simply continue to spoil from within.

“There is… another option.” My throat was suddenly parched. My heart pounded in my chest, and my hands shook. Fear gripped me. At this moment, I wasn’t sure what scared me more. Letting someone else I cared about die when I could save them? Or putting another shackle around my neck? “I have a way to heal you. Completely I mean, Scarlet Rot and all. You would get your lost limb back, be back to perfect form and everything.”

“And what would be the cost,” she grimaced the question. She knew more than most that there was no such thing as a free lunch.

“For you? You would be trapped on an Island with a few others until I could free you. I am already working on it, so it shouldn’t be too long.”

“And what would it cost you?” I should have said it wouldn’t cost me anything. It would hardly be a lie. I was already planning on leaving everyone behind. As I told Ranni, what was the difference between twelve and thirteen?

Maybe it was my nature as a Dragon of Freedom. Perhaps I was just scared that I would be unable to escape the Island when the ritual was completed.

The words would not leave my lips.

“You must leave me,” taking my silence for what it was, Millicent urged me. “Please, let me pass alone. The Scarlet Rot writhes now, worse than ever. Soon, I won’t be more than a mound of flesh. Curse-laden. Untouchable. I wouldn’t want such a thing to bring you harm.”

Why was I such a coward?

I had gone against gods with barely a sweat, despite all the pain they could (and did) inflict on me.

I had sat upon the Throne of Want despite knowing what I was dooming myself to.

I have lied, murdered, and stolen my way to the top.

Why could I not tell one white lie to a dying woman I liked to save her life?

I knew why.

Pain was fleeting. Morality was subjective.

Anyone I bound would be with me to the end of time. A permanent risk.

I had chosen to be a Dragon of Life because I feared the permanence of death.

And I could think of no fate worse than personality death, my body paraded around for eternity while I was either gone from it or, worse, still trapped in it.

As soon as I discovered, through Emma, the power the women held over me, I had thought of a use for it. I had still been trapped in my cell.

Using a command seal on any of the women, I could give one order to solve all my problems.

'Order me to go to sleep. Then Order my body to do everything to get free.'

Through that convoluted process, I would turn myself into a machine. No pain or suffering. I could wander through millions of games and worlds and only wake up once free.

I had thought about asking Robin to give me that order when she appeared in my cell. The words never left my lips, as they couldn't now.

In my desperation to find an alternative, I thought of stuffing myself, one piece at a time, through the bars. I used my escape as justification for why that final solution, that terrible yet easy idea, was not necessary.

I hadn't regretted that choice once until I awoke atop the Forge of the Giants.

"I won't leave you," I said to Millicent as I stopped trying to heal her.

Power of a different sort, one far more final and absolute, gathered in my hand in the shape of a red dagger.

"Thank you." She must have felt Death in my hands because she did not ask me to leave again. Instead, she struggled to reach for something around her neck, and I paused. Eventually, she found what she was looking for and held it out to me.

It was a talisman depicting a raised prosthetic blade.

"Take it," she urged. "It is all I can provide you in recompense for all you have done and will do. Though I fear I have one last request of you, knowing you hold the Rune of Death."

"Name it," I said as I threaded the talisman upon the chain on my neck. Too many, and their magic would interfere with each other. They were like rings in Dark Souls. If I was playing a game, I would choose them based on min-maxing their benefit. But this

wasn't a game. So I only kept those of sentimental value. It joined the Shard of Alexander, the Carian Filigreed Crest, the Bull-goat's talisman.

"I ask you to slay Malenia. Slay her and banish the Rot from this world."

"I was already planning on it."

"I know," Millicent drew herself up, staring at my kneeling form at eye level. "I know your means and skills. Should you use all in your arsenal, not even the Blade of Miquella could hope to stand before you. My final request is thus; Kill her in honourable combat. Even should she forget her pride and dignity and give in to the Scarlet Rot, as she did facing Radahn, I ask you never do so to equal her. I ask of you, my Lord, an impossible task. Are you able to defeat the undefeated with skill alone?"

"I am. And I will."

"Then I ask you to kill me and cut the Rot from this land."

I plunged Destined Death into her heart, cursing my own cowardice and hypocrisy.

Her smile, the same red as her hair, was radiant.

******

I reached the base of the Haligtree in a daze.

My body was on autopilot, taking one step in front of the other. Any enemies that tried to kill me were cut down where they stood. I was so powerful by this point that I hadn't died since facing Placidusax, an ancient Elden Lord. The pests, knights, and monstrosities that called the tree home were but wheat before my blade.

They never rose again.

By the time I reached Malenia, perhaps only a handful of beings still survived in the tree's branches.

I was sad I wouldn't get a clean sweep, but I couldn't put forth the energy to ensure my genocide was complete.

I found her sitting in a chair, hand laid out on the furrows of the tree. It looked like a womb to my eyes. Leaves fell around us, and wind swayed the white flowers that dotted the clearing.

It was silent but for the sound of the wind and the leaves. All the trumpeters, pests, soldiers, and others who would have made noise in the distance were long dead.

"I dreamt for so long." She looked like Millicent, I realized. Malenia was taller, and the Rot had claimed more of her. Out of her limbs, only one arm was intact. The infestation had also claimed her head, robbing her of her eyesight.

"My flesh was dull gold… and my blood, rotted. Corpse after corpse, left in my

wake…" She stood from her seat, eight and a half feet tall and slowly attached the prosthetic arm that had lain at her feet. Her blade was at least nine feet long. I made no move to take advantage of her unhurried state. "As I awaited… his return."

Finally, that scarlet hair that reminded me of love, passion, blood, and Rot was covered by a winged helm.

"…Heed my words. I am Malenia. Blade of Miquella. And I have never known defeat."

As if her slow movements were a lie, Malenia was on me in a flash. I took the first blow on my shield, ready to attack in the opening the rebound would provide.

Her metallic foot crashed into my side.

I flew, rolling on the ground in a heap of bruises, broken bones, and pain.

Malenia impaled me before I had the chance to stand.

That was my first death at the hand of the Demi-god. I barely lasted five seconds.

It wouldn't be my last.

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Fighting Malenia was… I could barely put it into words.

Radahn was a mountain that moved with the power and suddenness of a rock slide. He was a force of solid nature. You either got out of the way, or you got crushed. As befitting his monicker, he would not fall even if the heavens themselves collapsed.

Malenia was a river. She flowed from one move to the next, no matter what stood between her. She could be a trickling stream or a flash flood. If anything stood in the way of the water, it was either circumvented or battered by the tide until it collapsed.

For someone as infatuated with the sea and water as I was, watching her fight was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen.

The following month was spent in a constant process of death and rebirth. As a tarnished, so long as my will remained intact and I wasn't slain by Destined Death, I would continue to reform with all my power. I do not know how many times I died, losing count after the second dozen, but I knew I could end this at any point I wished.

I could snipe her from the branches with my great bow.

I could burn the Haligtree in an unending tide of fire and lighting.

I could summon an army of spirits and lay waste to her.

A hundred and one ideas on how to kill the 'undefeated' flowed through my mind, and I refused to use any of them.

Initially, it had been my promise to Millicent that had stayed my hand. While she would never know I broke my word, I would know. I did not want to live with that for the

rest of eternity.

I continued to fall under the blows of her blade, arms, and legs.

I discarded my shield after the third day.

I dropped the Dark Moon Greatsword and my bow at the site of Grace on the fifth.

The Raging Wolf armour was left there on the seventh, and I faced Malenia in nothing but the plain clothes of champions of the badlands.

As the weeks passed, the white flowers of the field had long turned red with my blood.

And one day, as I stood from my most recent death at the hands of the waterfowl dance, I realized I wasn't numb anymore.

"My consort," Ranni spoke up one day. I didn't know when she had awoken. "Why must you fight my half-sister in such a manner? I am sure the valkyrie would rather a lessening of thy suffering, regardless of thy promise."

I didn't answer, just made my way back into the arena.

What had been a burden of a promise had turned into a goal I fought towards.

There is a feeling all Soulsborne players face at least once in their lives.

There were different names for it, and everybody faced it at different times, but I recognized this feeling.

The Wall.

Whether it was against Flamelurker, the Asylum Demon, Ornstein and Smough, Black Dragon Kalameet, the Nameless King, Father Gascoigne, the Orphan of Kos, Ashina Genichiro, or any number of other challenging bosses in these games. At some point, players will meet an enemy who completely stonewalls their progress.

Because of unique moves, environment, or build incompatibility, it didn't matter.

What mattered was what people did when faced with that impassible Wall.

Those who gave up, threw in the towel, gave in to their despair, and went hollow did not really get the games. While I never begrudged anyone their choice, as I understood the genre wasn't for everyone, I grieved for them.

I grieved for the joy they missed.

I grieved for the affirmation that came from climbing that Wall.

I rejoiced for all those who threw themselves against those bloody bricks, whose will and determination met the challenge and laid it low.

Some played Souls games for the lore, some for the PVP or bragging rights. No matter their reason, I called them my comrades. For we had all faced and overcome our Wall.

The last time I faced a Wall was against the Orphan of Kos in Bloodborne. Even in DS1, after leaving the cell, if I wasn't skilled enough to confront someone, then I found a

workaround. I shot them from far away. I buried their homes in fire and rubble.

I ambushed and assassinated when possible.

Only later, when I became more skilled, did I let go of those desperate ploys at victory. I learned to enjoy combat for the contest of skill it was. But I never forgot those tactics. They were always a fallback, a way to ensure nobody really stood between me and my freedom.

If the Festival of War failed, I had plans to release a horde of Rot-infested animals upon the Wailing Dunes and assassinate Radahn after he exhausted himself for months. It would take killing all of his soldiers, Jerren included, but it was an option I had considered.

"I would thank Millicent if I could," I told Ranni after I reformed.

Bound by her promise, Malenia had become my Wall.

If I had approached her without that pact, in the state of mind I had fallen into after Melina's death, I would have desecrated this duel in the most heinous ways.

I would have missed out on the one feeling all Souls players wish they could feel again.

After all, hit a Wall enough, and it will come down.

Those who tore down the Berlin Wall did not realize the significance of their actions until they were carving the stone to pieces and climbing atop its ruins.

So too did I not realize the moment until my blade pierced Malenia's chest.

If you were to ask what opening led to me impaling the Demi-god, I could not tell you. We had clashed many times, traded so many blows and bled the other enough that it flowed into each other. Even at the threat of death, I could not tell you if she had made a mistake or stumbled or if I had simply gotten the better of her.

I was sure I would not be able to answer a single question about what led to that stab for the rest of my life.

I was just as confident I would remember the next few minutes for the rest of my days.

I withdrew Moonveil and backed away. I knew what was coming.

I had heard from Millicent the events of the past.

I had waded through the swamps and mire of what had once been the prosperous land of Caelid. I wasn't surprised when a red flower started to grow from the blood of the Demi-god.

I was surprised when I started to sing.

"The colours of his morning,

The darkness of his night,
Little graves that gave no warning,
A sun that brought no light.”

For the first time since Melina’s death, music flowed from me. I didn’t know why this song came to me, despite my love for the Wheel of Time, but I went with it.

The flower Bloomed.

“The scarlet bloom flowers once more.” Malenia took to the air on Rot-infested wings like a caterpillar emerging from its cocoon. Butterflies filled the area. “You will witness true horror. Now, rot!”

Scarlet Rot filled the air, my flesh bubbling and twisting in a familiar sensation of pain and poison.

My voice remained steady.

“He saw his whole world breaking,
That tortured soul I met,
In the prison of his making,
The man who can’t forget.”

I met her in the air.

Spiritual power gathered at my feet, as Torrent had taught me.

Gravity bent to my will, as I had learned from Radahn.

I never found the spell the crucible knights used to fly, but I had achieved my dream in my own way.

Locked in a dance of death in the air with Malenia, I flew.

And I continued to sing.

“I can still hear the way that he cried,
for the ones he was missing,
I can still hear the way that he cried,
for the ones he had lost.”

Malenia assumed a familiar stance after a one-footed leap, arm and blade held over her left shoulder in preparation. It was reminiscent of a waterfowl ready to strike.

I had died to this move an uncountable number of times. A series of moves that flowed from one to the other. Over forty swings in five seconds.

That was accounting for the time she took to reposition.

Each swing had the strength of a tank shell. She threw out dozens per second and was stronger than tens of thousands of men.

I had previously compared Malenia to a river, and the Waterfowl Dance was the flood.

I assumed the same stance.

My heart was calm.

My mind was clear.

"He saw them in the rivers,
He felt them in the rain.
In dreams he heard them whisper,
The truth that is his pain."

We danced.

As two rivers flowed down a mountain, we crashed, splashed and combined into one greater torrent.

We flowed over, around, and through each other in a battle so deadly, so intimate that I knew her as well as I knew myself at that moment.

I felt her longing for her brother. Her absolute trust in him. Her lonely vigil, waiting for his rebirth.

In the shadow of her wings, I saw the figure of two women.

One with vivid red hair.

One who smiled at me with love.

Our dance ended with each of our blades in the other's heart.

"Your strength, extraordinary…" she gasped, blood flowing from her mouth. Her wings sagged behind her, and I could no longer see Millicent or Melina's shadow.

"The mark… of a true Lord…"

The Wall fell.

Moonveil, wreathed in reddish black energy, pumped slowly with every beat of her heart. Her prosthetic blade fell from my own chest with her.

"O, dear Miquella…" She tried to reach out for the tree with her one real arm. "O, dearest Miquella, my brother… I'm sorry. I finally met my match…"

She collapsed. Dead.

I pretended not to see that scarlet smile.

It was too familiar.

“He caused the whole world’s breaking,
That tortured soul I met.
In a prison of his making,
The man who can’t forget.”

Blood bubbled from my lips as I finished my song. My power was already working to heal me.

I fell backwards, unable to keep my feet.

Four cold, blue arms caught me.

Ranni gently poured crimson tears into my mouth, the rejuvenating draught finishing what my spell could not.

One of her hands wiped my face.

When had I started crying?

As if the floodgates had opened, I bawled my pain, despair, and grief into the comforting arms of my companion.

I cried from the self-hatred at being unable to trust.

I cried for the hopelessness I felt in my continued entrapment.

I cried because I was tired, yet I knew I couldn’t rest.

I cried because I would never see the woman I loved again.

I do not know how long I wept, Ranni silently comforting me.

When I regained myself, I looked into those expressive blue eyes.

“Thanks,” I said simply. It was all I would say to Melina when she pulled me from myself. It was all I needed to say to Ranni.

“Of course, my Consort. I shall always be by thy side. Thy guiding moonlight.” Unbidden, a chuckle left my mouth at her words. Her doll remained expressionless, but her spiritual body smiled radiantly. She was terrible at hiding her emotions when it was out.

We stood, facing each other for a moment, but I broke the moment when I approached Malenia’s fallen form.

Her Great Rune was as infested with the Rot as she had been. I would need to activate it upon a divine tower, but that was something for later.

I picked up the body of the shard bearer and laid her to rest upon the roots of the Haligtree, in that womb-like alcove, under the face in the wood.

“My Consort,” Ranni spoke as flames gathered in my mouth. “Miquella is not here.”

“I know,” I said as I turned to face her. The fire grew behind me. Placidusax’s Ruin would consume the great tree before the sun rose tomorrow. “If he was here, he wouldn’t

have left his sister waiting for so long.”

I made my way to where my items lay near the site of Grace. As I redonned my armour, I asked the question that had burned me for years.

“Was there another way? Could I have saved her?” I didn’t know what answer I wanted to hear.

“There was,” Ranni answered. I took a deep breath. “Below the Capitol, locked away where no mortal is to reach, lays the Three Fingers. Their hatred and madness could have fulled the flames of the Forge. But any who met those twisted beings were possessed and robbed of their will. They would be bent on burning the world to ash. Melina would have left and fought before allowing thee to take such a path.”

“Thank you,” I said as I released my breath. “For being honest.”

It didn’t matter if I would be locked into the ‘bad end’, there was a way I could have saved her.

I would have to live with that.

Author's Note:

You didn't think I would leave you all hanging for a week, did you?
I had initially planned to release this chapter on Monday, but plans changed. I am posting this through my phone, so pardon me if there are more errors in this note.
I included this part when I said the last chapter had been the easiest to write. I had over 15k words ready by yesterday. I decided to split the chapter as it felt like the right choice. The amount of response and feedback I received from the last chapter was so overwhelming that it pushed me to finish the final edits on this one (at the cost of a lot of sleep).
As I mentioned in the last note, the end of the previous chapter and this one mark the low point in Mikael's life. I hope I portrayed his feelings well and the emotions he had to go through to reconcile them. We are so close to the end of Volume 1, on top of all the great responses, that I am so excited. I still have a few twists left. Nothing is as it seems.
Plans are all coming together.
The next chapter is the last in Elden Ring, though not the end of the Volume just yet.
For those who are familiar with the catalogue and how weird things are, don't worry. I already have a Side Story written to explain why things are this way. (I actually wrote that chapter way back before publishing the first chapter. I haven't released it due to spoilers. It will come out after Volume 1 ends. I keep returning to it to ensure I am consistent with my rules.)
All that downer stuff out of the way, time for some good news for those struggling to keep going with the story.
Mikael isn't the only one keeping secrets. One, of paramount importance, is being held from him. You all should know it by now.
Who's his patron?

DESOLATION VI

Failure is a rocky hill:

Climb it! Climb it with a will!
Failure is a broken bone:

Set it! Grin, and do not groan!
Failure is a tangled string:

Puzzle out the knotted thing!
Failure is a river swift:

Swim it! Swim, and do not drift!
Failure is a black morass:

Cross it! There are tufts of grass!
Failure is a treacherous pit:

Scramble! Clamber out of it!
Failure is an inky night:

Sing! Expect the morning light!
Failure is an ugly coal:

Fuse it to a diamond soul!

"Is he dead?" I asked, removing my hand from the giant cocoon. Miquella's great rune floated in it. The cocoon was an odd and disgusting sight, reminiscent of an abstract art piece. The arm that fell from its opening was much too long and thin. Like all the blood had been drained from it.

"He is not, my Consort," Ranni explained. She was in her larger doll form and had been since I had slain Mohg. "He is neither alive nor dead. His transformation, to what I do not know, was halted when Mohg stole him from the Haligtree. I suspect the Lord of Blood was attempting to coopt him into some new, vile form."

"He did seem to have his freak on for his half-brother," I looked at the mangled remains of the Omen. I kicked the blood mess again, just because I felt like it. "I know Marika and Radagon have some sort of conjoined twins things going on, Melina knew that much, but I expected that to be the end of the incest rabbit-hole. I should know better. George R.R. Martin is a freak like that."

"One day, my Consort, we will need speak about the absurdity of thy words." Ranni sat on one of the edges of the 'palace' of blood. She was so smol, I wanted to hug her. I

settled for patting the head of the miniature Ranni poking out from one of my pouches. “At times, thee seem almost mad, speaking in tongues. At others, thy deductions on the nature of the world, such as thy deduction of the nature of the Formless Mother.”

“Eh,” I shrugged, sitting beside her. I idly picked up one of her hands and fiddled with her doll’s fingers while I talked. She let me. “It wasn’t hard. This place had such Bloodborne energy, you know, with all the blood. Anyway, I know the GOO are a thing here. I was half expecting him to turn into some eldritch abomination from beyond the stars, like Astel or something.”

“GOO?”

“Great Old Ones,” I explained. “It is a term that refers to cosmic entities from beyond the planet that operate on a different logic than us. Some are so alien that just interacting with them or acknowledging them is enough to drive you mad. When Mohg started to count down from three, I knew to pay attention. He was stabbing the air, blood raining down like he was impaling something. I knew something was up. The fact that I couldn’t see anything doesn’t mean much. Maybe I just am missing an essential item or do not have enough insight. Either way, I was prepared when something tried to take control of my blood.”

“Thy disappearing trick continues to befuddle thy foes.”

“Don’t fix what ain’t broke,” I shrugged again, setting her hand down and just holding it. It was cool. Though her doll’s face was as impassive as ever, her spectral visage blushed a deep blue. I pretended I couldn’t see it. “To be honest, I was a bit let down. After Malenia, I was expecting more from the last shard bearers. This guy was a mage who barely knew how to fight. To say nothing of Miquella.”

“While I can understand thy desire for stimulation, my Consort, I would remind thee that thy possess powers outside the realms of even most Demi-gods.”

One of her hands unlatched the helmet from my head. She set it to the side and gently nudged me down. I allowed her to guide my head to her lap. Ranni liked to run her hands through my hair whenever we had the chance to rest. It had been something Melina had enjoyed doing as well. I liked my hair, not in the vapid way where I spent hours on it, but in that it was one of the few things that remained that reminded me of my parents. I took care of it when I could.

“Malenia’s ability to slay thee was due to the limitations thee placed upon thy self and her own skill. Despite being one of the foremost warriors of the Lands Between, thy still laid her low. I would be most surprised if any could face thee. Limitations or no. Buoyed by Malenia’s, Mohg’s and now Miquella’s Great Runes, even Marika the Eternal is not your match.”

“About that,” I grabbed one of the hands running through my hair. I stared at Ranni’s piercing blue eyes, willing her to understand my seriousness. I had been putting this conversation off for too long. I had no reason to justify my silence with the last shard bearers dead or indisposed. “Before we go to the Erdtree, I would like more information about your plans.”

Depending on what she said, my part of the conversation would either be very easy or very hard.

“Of course, my Consort.” Far from being put off by my question, she smiled down at me gently. “Allow me to expound a little further upon the Order I envision. Mine will be an order not of gold but the stars and moon of the chill night. I would keep them far from the earth beneath our feet.”

“So,” I said, trying to understand what that meant. “You are going to take Order and… leave? Just get gone? Go to space and never return?” She had talked about a long, dark journey before but I hadn’t thought she meant space travel. I thought it was about our trip through Nokstella, which I knew roughly translated to night star.

“As it is now, life, and souls, and Order are bound tightly together, but I would have them at great remove.” Ranni elaborated. “The world is better off if the Order that people live within is so far away that it is not something that can be seen, touched, or worshiped. To do so, I will leave the world along with my new Order. I will not interfere in the Lands Between, nor will they be able to interfere with me. Unlike Marika under the influence of the Two Fingers and the Greater Will. I would have the certainties of faith and touch… All become impossibilities..”

“So, even if GOOs come down and start messing things up, they can’t really do much without the Order as a system. I imagine they need to work through mediums like Marika or Radagon.” I paused, a realization coming to me. “That’s what you meant when you said that anyone who met the Three Fingers would be ‘robbed of their will’. They can’t grasp Order or influence the world unless they wear a meat suit.”

“They would have only controlled thy actions at the end of the journey when Order was within reach. Should thou fail, as Vyke did, and succumb to madness, they would have retreated to await the next Tarnished to find them.”

I gave it good odds I would be able to fight off their influence since I was an Out Of Context problem. Still, Melina would not have believed me unless I told her everything. Unless I had trusted her completely.

Thinking about her still hurt. It likely always would.

I sometimes awoke screaming, dreaming of a fire that wouldn’t go out and consumed all I held dear. I could do nothing but watch her burn. The worst part was that no matter

my nightmare, Melina would never blame me. Even as I reached out to save her, she smiled at me in and told me she loved me.

I always awoke in tears, Ranni holding me as I sobbed.

I don't understand why the Demi-god was being so supportive. It couldn't be just because I was most likely to become Elden Lord. If I had learned anything during my time with her, no force on earth could make Ranni do what she didn't want to.

She would rather die.

Still, she had been truthful about her plans as far as I could tell. I hadn't expected her to lie, exactly. I just wasn't sure what the plan was. If she wanted to rule the Lands Between as Marika had, I would have supported her for all the help she had given me. I would have eventually had to leave, but while I was here, I would provide aid.

If ruling had been her goal, then this conversation would be easy. I would promise support, and that would be that.

Knowing Ranni wanted to leave, taking Order far beyond the reach of the natives of the Lands Between made the conversation harder.

Our goals lined up, and there was no reason not to make the offer except for my cowardice.

After Melina, Millicent, and Malenia, I swore I wouldn't allow it to hold me back.

I just hoped she couldn't feel my hands shaking.

I guess she did because she looked at me with worry.

"Wouldst thou come to me, even now, my one and only lord?" She must think I was silent and shaking because I was rejecting her Order. That wasn't it at all.

"It's not that I don't want to go with you," I said, and her face fell, so I hurried to continue. "I have a bit of a situation on my hands, that's all." She looked at me in confusion for a second before realization overtook her.

"Thy companions and their curse," she waived one of her hands negligently. "Worry not, we need not depart right away. No curse shall be able to stand up to us once we control Order. You will be Elden Lord and your duty fulfilled. We will free them. From there, they should understand their place in things."

"Yeah…," I said slowly. I procrastinated, putting off the explanation I knew would come. I took a deep breath and counted down in my head. 3. 2. 1. Fuck it. "My curse isn't to become Elden Lord."

She looked at me in confusion.

So I told her.

I told her of a world without magic.

I told her about my life. I told her of my Fromsoft and their games. I told her about

the Waifu catalogue and a silly little story that had turned into a nightmare. I told her about fictional worlds and dimensional travel.

I told her the truth about the Island and the women on it. I told her about what we had discovered about the nature of our imprisonment.

I told her about the benefits of being bound and the demerits.

I explained, my voice shaking, about the power the women of the Island held over me and how I used Command Seals to mitigate it.

I delved into my fears of mind control, of losing who I was. My greatest fears were not of an enemy but of an accident. One wrong word, and I would be undone.

Emma had bound me to my flesh in that cell.

Diana had bound me to my sanity before I lit the First Flame.

One had dissipated after a minute.

The other had kept me burning in the fires of the First Flame for thousands of years, unable to go hollow.

More than that, I told her of the hope and dread I felt upon attaining my freedom. I would have everything I ever wanted, but I would never be able to truly leave them behind.

Though I had long ago found a loophole to Diana's inadvertent command of 'Don't you dare leave us!' I was still bound to stay 'near' them. I had mitigated it by spending more time with them when they were summoned.

If, as I suspected, they had all fallen prey to my lures, they would never let me go.

That had been why I was in such a hurry to get them their freedoms. The longer they were trapped on the Island, the more infatuated they would become. And, more than anything else, I understood how mad someone could go from love.

"So," Ranni said hours later after listening to me tell my tale. "Thy companions are infatuated with thee. Thy are cursed, but only to love and obey their commands."

"I'm sure I could learn to accept my love for them in any other circumstances," I explained. "My real problem with the situation is that they can't just kill me but control me. Going mad isn't a problem. Even before this whole thing started, I was always an odd duckling. It is going mad from outside influences. If I go crazy, it should be because of me and no one else. Someone out there fucked with my mind and made me susceptible to them and, possibly, anyone else I bind. That's what pisses me off. I'd have no problems if they went full yandere but couldn't control me."

"I do not know what 'yandere' means, but I understand thy problem. The solution is simple."

"Really?" I perked up, hopeful she had discovered something I was missing.

“Of course, once I am ‘bound’, I shall use our new Order to change the nature of thy curse. They will no longer be able to influence you in the new world. Their mouths will not form the words, nor will their minds be able to consider the option.”

“If I was willing to mind-control them, I would have from the beginning. Besides, I thought you wanted to remove Order so it wouldn’t be abused.” I sagged. I didn’t want to be controlled, nor did I want to control others. Tempt them with my lures? Sure, and if they fell for them, that was on them. But I feared being trapped within my own body or having my personality wiped so much that I wasn’t willing to inflict it on others.

“I wish Order at a remove so it might not influence the world. I intend to use all power available to facilitate our journey, my Consort. I see thy point about control, however.” She put one of her hands to her chin in thought at the difficult conundrum we were in.

For a minute, she was lost in thought before she, in an uncharacteristic move, shrugged her shoulders.

“Never thee mind the intricacies of the Harem, Melina entrusted such to me. We shall settle the matter once we have established our Order, left the Lands Between, and we have attained thy freedom. Should the need be, bind me with these Command Seals of yours. Then thee need not fear I misspeak.”

Wut?

No, seriously, what?

Ranni, the Demi-god who discarded her own flesh rather than be controlled, had just asked me to use a Command Spell on her. All so I wouldn’t be afraid.

There was also something about a harem, but I was a bit too floored by the later part to think about the former.

My expression must have revealed my absolute bamboozlement at Ranni’s last statement.

“If things are as thee claim,” she explained, “then we can do nothing here. Once I am upon thy Island, I shall enquire into the true nature of thy Consorts. I shall not begrudge thee if thee attain freedom and flee from us while I do so. Simply know that I shall chase thee beyond time and space, through worlds eternal. I suspect I will not be alone in the attempt.”

Looking over my actions, it had been what I didn’t do that caused the most trouble. Yes, it stemmed from a good source. The women were a danger, that was a fact I don’t think anyone could deny, but it had been my choice to keep it a secret, to not work things out with them.

Even now, questions whirled around my head.

Was I really ‘me’?

Had I forgotten orders that, even now, were twisting my thoughts and actions?

Was ‘I’ already dead, and the ‘me’ of now just a new creation of the Island women?

My manic desire to be free would make sense then, as would my love for them.

Most of the women I had chosen in the Catalogue had been heroic in nature, or at least lighter on the morality grey scale. A few of them, however, were more than willing to manipulate one man, a stranger and a potential slaver if it would free them.

If I could trust my memories were real, then none of the women had done anything that intentionally caused me harm.

But that was a big if.

At the end of the day, it came down to two things.

Was I content to be trapped into inaction by my paranoia?

What steps could I take to improve myself from my Rot if not?

I believe I told Robin, the first time we met in the cell all those centuries ago, something like, ‘Even if I am insane, I have to act like I am sane. That is the only way to live’.

Time I live by my own philosophy.

“You are right,” I said as I stood up. I offered the Demi-god a hand, which Ranni took, and I lifted her to her feet. “We can’t do anything here. Whether I bind you or not doesn’t change my situation. So, I’ll return the question you asked me earlier. Wouldst you come to me, even now?”

“Of course, my Dear Consort.”

And I kissed her.

It was a light thing, her doll body unable to function as a flesh and blood one would, but I needed to do something to show Ranni what this conversation had meant to me. She had supported me all these years, and I had extended my trust to her, and she hadn’t betrayed it.

I would rather trust you, than simply continue to spoil from within.

The fear was still there. It always would be. Such was the nature of a phobia.

I felt no lighter after our conversation, and no weight had been lifted from my chest. Whether we found a solution to my little ‘mind-control’ problem or not was immaterial at this time.

All that had changed was that I felt a little more confident and like my old self.

I can’t stop using command seals just yet, maybe not ever, but I had taken the first step to reaching out to trust someone.

Time would tell whether it was the right move, but I felt content knowing I was trying

to heal my Rot.

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If there were one thing I was good at after all this time, it was saying goodbye.

Some were just harder than others.

“Who are you?” The misbegotten blacksmith asked as I stood before him, his eyes unfocused.

I fingered the sword at my waist. It was a straight sword, unlike the katana and greatswords I had favoured since arriving in Elden Ring. It was a blade forged utilizing the power of all the Great Runes and stones carved from the corpse of the ancient Elden Lord Placidusax. A weapon fit to slay a god.

“I’m no one important,” I said.

Hewg was one of only a few who remained within the burning Hold. Most had relocated to Stormveil, though who knew where Gideon had disappeared to. I’m sure his betrayal will be sudden and inevitable. After forging this god-slaying blade, Hewg seemed to lose himself, almost going hollow in a way. Of the man who once called me his Lord, nothing remained.

“Could you tell me what happened?” He continued to hammer away at another weapon. “Why is the Roundtable burning, in ruins? Why does that girl weep for me? Have I forgotten something of dire importance?”

Bile rose in my throat.

For this alone, I would kill Marika.

Hewg was a perfect example of what I feared becoming. He was robbed of his free will, memories, and personality stolen from him by a higher power.

Not even able to recognize those he loved.

“She is in mourning,” I explained as I looked at Roderika. She was openly crying as she watched us. “She recently lost her father.”

“Hm,” he grunted. The crackling of fire around us and the ringing of his hammer was all that sounded in the hold for a moment. “He must have been proud. I have never seen such a gift for spirit tuning before.”

“He was.”

I left him to his work, approaching the red-cloaked woman.

“My thanks, my Lord,” Roderika said as I approached while wiping her eyes. “Though he might not remember, I’m sure he would be happy to have your sentiment. You have always done right by him and I. I only wish he would allow me to take him from this

place."

"Even if he doesn't want to leave," I said as I laid my hand on her shoulder. Power flowed from me, a dark blue tint coming to her eyes. "I expect you to live. With him if possible. Do not stay at the Hold. There is nothing here for either of you. Go to Stormveil and let Kenneth and Nepheli know I sent you."

"I can see it," she spun around the Roundtable Hold with wide eyes. "The Starlight! Your Grace!"

"I'm not a god and not Elden Lord yet, so it's not permanent. A few months at most." My Talents allowed me much more liberty than most players would have. "You already know the way to Stormveil. I am just expediting the process. It should be strong enough for you to teleport with Hewg, even if he isn't cooperative."

"Thank you, my Lord." She bowed as I turned to leave.

This had been one of my last goodbyes. I had a few things to do while I waited for the next summoning. I would send off my items and let the women know it was time to start the ritual. From there, I wouldn't delay the next summoning, giving me a week to kill Marika, Radagon, and anything else that might try and stop me from standing before the Elden Ring.

I was looking forward to the challenge.

"I'll take care of the spirits. You take care of yourself." I said before I teleported out.

I reappeared upon the path leading to the Carian Manor.

I would say goodbye to Iji and let him know it was safe to release Blaidd in a few weeks. Ranni's Shadow would be free from the Greater Will and its Two Fingers once we had left the Lands Between. While there, I'd swipe Selvus notes and any books still in the Rises.

I was surprised at the quiet when I appeared upon the path leading to the manor. Usually, I could hear Iji hammering away as I approached.

When I found him there, burning in black flames and surrounded by the bodies of the Black Knife assassins, a part of me was unsurprised.

Elden Ring had been kicking my balls in this entire time. What was one more tragedy?

"Oh, Iji," Ranni appeared beside me. With a wave of her hand, the black flame was extinguished. The troll did not stir. I knew why.

The Black Knives still retained fragments of Destined Death. Iji would not be coming back.

I hugged her from behind as her magic carved a pit in the ground. As her doll body remained impassive, I could see her spirit shake with tears. She lowered the blacksmith in and covered it with dirt.

Stone shaped itself into the image of the man, bent over his anvil. No words were carved on it. These minor spells were well within Ranni's abilities, even in her doll body.

We stared at the monument for a few minutes as I cast my spell to destroy the bodies of the Black Knives.

Unlike Iji, they would probably reform somewhere. That was actually for the best. They would have to live with the knowledge they failed as we left the Lands Between forever.

Sometimes living with failure was worse than death.

"He knew what he risked when he aided me on this path," Ranni said eventually. "He always spoke of his death as inevitable. I had hoped he was wrong, but I see he was still the wiser of us." I said nothing, letting her mourn. "May I ask thee something, my Dear Consort."

"Of course."

"Please sing a dirge for my teacher. I do not believe he ever heard one of thy songs, even as Blaidd bragged about them. He was quite jealous of my Shadow for the opportunity. Despite his race, Iji was a lover of the arts. He enjoyed reading and music. Games of strategy and cunning. He was…" Her voice cracked a bit, but she kept going. "He was the gentlest man I have ever met." I held her as she quieted down, searching for one I felt appropriate.

I started to hum.

"The day is done, the time has come
You battled hard, the war is won
You did your worst
You tried your best
Now it's time to rest."

We stayed like that, holding each other even after my song was done.

Eventually, we had to move on. We were both worried about Blaidd, trapped in the Gaol.

When we reached his place of incarceration, we found it empty. We searched for a while but found only the barest of traces. Thanks to my Talent, I could determine that the Shadow had escaped alone.

Buoyed by this news, we teleported to Ranni's Rise. If he was free, Blaidd would have come here. We hoped to find a trail to follow. Worse comes to worst, I could delay our departure while we searched.

We needn't have worried.

We found Blaidd at the foot of the Rise, surrounded by the corpses of the Black Knives.

Unlike Iji, he still lived.

"Blaidd!" I waved at him as I approached, happy to see him still alive. "You dog! You had me worried!"

He stood, turning to me while he muttered to himself. "No. I'm part of her very being! I could never betray her! No matter what might happen… Ranni… She needs me…"

He lunged, greatsword swinging down at me at a speed few warriors could see, let alone react to.

I side-stepped it easily.

"Dude!" I backed away from another swing. "It's me, your bro! Wolf-buddy!" He continued to swing at me, muttering to himself. He wasn't really seeing me, moving on instinct. I wonder how long he had sat here, by himself and surrounded by bodies, wondering if he had been betrayed by Ranni. "A little help here, Doll!"

Dodging under a wide swing, I tripped him. As he fell to the ground, ice gathered in my throat.

I'm sure I would have needed to kill him in the game, but I had options here.

So long as Blaidd wasn't completely mad or set on committing suicide by Elden Lord.

Ranni formed in her larger doll as Blaidd struggled to free himself from the ice binding his limbs. Given enough time, he could succeed.

"Blaidd!" She said, as close to shouting as I had ever heard her. Blaidd stilled. "My Shadow. My brother. What is wrong with thee?"

"You left me!" He snarled at her, and she took a step back in surprise. "You and Iji! You should have known I would never betray you!"

"I knew it was never thy intent to betray me," Ranni explained as she approached the wolfman, who stilled at her touch. "We placed you in the gaol to protect you. The Two Fingers would not allow their tools, thou or I, to escape them. Please, they have already taken Iji. Do not allow them to take thee from me as well." Her voice was pleading, and I could see it reaching the Shadow.

"You should have trusted me," he repeated as the fight left him. "I could have saved Iji."

"I know."

I left the pair to talk, entering the Rise to liberate it of its contents. I mostly tossed the books into one of the magical pouches, though I had to stifle a laugh when I reached the top of the tower and found Ranni's chair.

I knew she looked taller the second time I visited! That isn't the proper way to use an almanac.

I was only gone for an hour and, when finished, I found the pair conversing quietly. Blaidd was free of the ice. They stood as I approached.

"My Dear Consort," Ranni said. "I thank thee for thy mercy with Blaidd. I would have grieved the loss of my Shadow."

"Sorry."

"It's fine," I waived off Blaidd's apology. He looked like a kicked puppy.

"I would ask thy leave," Ranni continued. At my questioning look, she elaborated. "I shall be taking Blaidd to Raya Lucaria. He will not be able to follow us on our journey. I have asked him to guard my mother in my stead. I will also be saying farewell to her. 'Tis long overdue."

"Sure," I agreed readily. "Want me to come with you? I already said bye to Jerren and Sellen, but seeing them again wouldn't be bad."

"No," I was surprised she shook her head. We hadn't been parted since meeting her in the ruins of Manus Celes. "I need not only stop there. I need retrieve an item. My dowry. It will take me a few days."

"Oh," I said lamely. Marriage was… well, it was something, and I wasn't the biggest fan of the concept of dowries. "I thought the Dark Moon Greatsword was your… dowry."

"'Tis the traditional return gift for Carian Princesses upon our engagement, true." The doll nodded its head, its face calm and impassive. The spirit twiddled its thumbs, blushing. "I speak of a gift from me. One only I can give. It is to celebrate our ascension, nuptials and thy crowning as Elden Lord."

God, she was so cute when she tried to be impassive like that and failed utterly. I shared a glance with Blaidd, a communion between bros passing between us.

"Alright," I nodded my head once more. It wasn't like I could control her anyway. I wasn't one of those guys who needed to know where my woman was at all times. I was possessive, not jealous. "I won't leave without you anyway. Just don't take too long. I will have the ritual go off in ten days or so. We will have to delay for another week if you're not there."

"It shall return by then, my Dear Consort." She turned from me, starting to cast her teleportation spell. That was one spell I hadn't learned yet. I hadn't seen the need when I could just move through sites of Grace.

"Will you have enough power with your doll?" I couldn't help but worry a bit. This was her second teleportation since she had rested. I was concerned that she would need to rest again before we needed to leave. She slept for years, and I was eager to see if my plan

would work.

“Thy needn’t worry. I shall never be wanting for power again.”

That wasn’t ominous at all.

As the portal opened, I turned to Blaidd and offered him my arm. He grasped it by the forearm in the way I had shown him, and for a moment, we embraced in the manly tradition of those who have seen Predator.

“Take care of her,” he told me as we separated.

“Will do, wolf-buddy,” I nodded and then paused. I would never get another opportunity for this. “Sorry about this.” He looked at me in confusion. Though he was taller than me, it wasn’t by so much that I couldn’t reach his head.

His tongue lolled out of his mouth as I scratched him behind the ears. He was as fluffy as I had expected.

Though I could see Ranni’s spiritual body roll its eyes as she pulled her Shadow through the portal, I was too busy laughing to make a comment.

Blaidd might not be Best Boi, but he was definitely Best Dog. Of Elden Ring, at least.

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“My Dear Consort,” Ranni’s voice whispered in my ear. I was so surprised that I flinched. Against most opponents, it would be irrelevant, too quick to notice. Against Hoarah Loux? I might as well have waived a red flag. “What exactly are thee doing?”

Our fists, still locked in a contest of strength, held firm. The first Elden Lord held me firm, our fingers intertwined, as he stomped the ground. Spikes rose up to impale me.

… I just realized how gay that all sounded.

I must have been overcome with the Jojo spirit at the sight of a real fucking stand.

“What’s it look like,” I grunted in the effort, trying to coat my feet in magic and float to avoid the rocks. “I’m wrestling.”

I was only partially successful. I managed to keep my feet and not be hurt, but my stability was broken, and my foe was able to bear me down in the contest of strength.

My arms buckled, and the mountain of a man slammed a knee into my sternum. My breath was driven from my chest, and I gasped. I was knocked backwards and into the air, and the warrior followed me with a roar.

Leaping into the air, Hoarah Loux grabbed me from the air and power bombed me into the ground.

Ow.

My spine was not meant to bend like that.

Rather than try and kill me when he had the chance, the chieftain of the badlands lept away.

“Get up, Warrior,” he called as I found my feet. My power was already healing my wounds. “Thou have slain my sons and seek to become Elden Lord. Stand! A crown is warranted with strength! Should that be enough to fell thee, I would weep for the Lands Between.”

The man had good instincts.

Had he followed up with his attack, my neck was bent at an angle to blast Placidusax’s Ruin at point blank.

I would regret ending our fight in that manner, but I was on a bit of a time crunch. I had been delayed due to the treck here and the battle with Gideon and now Godfrey. Apparently, burning down the Erdtree destroyed the capitol, disconnecting the sites of Grace nearby, so I had to make my way here the long way.

I hadn’t expected to face both of them, and if I died to either, I’m not sure I would have enough time to reform before the girls performed the ritual.

To miss my chance due to some miss-timing would be annoying.

Thankfully Gideon was an easy fight. The All-knowing was an excellent mage and knew spells from all over the Lands Between. It didn’t mean he was a good fighter. He hadn’t trained his muscle memory to use his abilities at the appropriate time without conscious thought.

I was pleasantly surprised to find Godfrey, now Hoarah Loux, was a much better challenge.

That and he had a motherfucking stand.

One of the holdovers of having all my memories from my life carved into my brain was that all the excitement and emotions I felt for things back then were still present today.

And I had been hyped to watch the next part of Stone Ocean. One day, I would find a world that had the entire series released on the most high-definition players available to that species, and I would binge it in one go. (Go to a Jojo world, you say? Are you nuts? I would fucking die!)

To see a stand, one as cool as Serosh had been incredible.

It was a bummer when it was killed, but that, too, had been cool in a brutal sort of way.

I got carried away a bit, which was what Ranni was asking about.

“And why, pray tell me, art thou naked and covered in oil, my Dear Consort?”

“He was doing it too,” I gestured petulantly to the mountain of a man, equally as nude

as me, even as I dodged one of his charges. Though he was covered in blood rather than oil. “It’s the proper way to wrestle. The greeks did it!”

…Maybe using the ancient greeks as an example wasn’t the best. They were kind of dicks.

In my defence, the man had just stripped himself of his armour, killed his Stand and covered himself in its blood.

I had gotten caught up in the moment. Sue me.

Getting behind the first Elden Lord, I gripped his waist with both arms. As I lifted the massive man over my head, my muscles bulged with effort. With a roar of my own, I suplexed Hoarah Loux into the ground.

Rather than let go, I twisted my body to wrap him in a full nelson.

I tried to get his head into a neck crank and snap his spine, but the man roared.

The sound had magic in it, on top of being impossibly loud.

My ears rang as I was forced to let go of my hold.

Hoarah Loux leaped into the air before crashing down with a fist slam. I rolled out of the way, but his combo wasn’t done. Though I dodged, the shockwave pushed me from my position, knocking me to the ground.

While I recovered, he plunged his fists into the earth.

“Thy might want to move, my Dear Consort.” If Ranni’s tone of voice didn’t tell me she was exasperated with me, the fact she was talking at all while I fought told me everything I needed to know about her thoughts on this fight.

That was fine.

She didn’t understand the manliness of this fight.

If I hadn’t already bound Torrent and sent him to the Island ahead of me, then I would go crying to him.

The first Elden Lord growled as he tore his hands from the ground in a rush of energy that I quickly lept away from.

As he rushed towards me, hands formed into claws, I decided to change tactics. Hoarah Loux favoured slams, holds, and using his power to affect the earth around him. While not the size of Radahn, he was still much too large for any wrestling techniques I could think of.

Magic hazed around me as I burned the oil from my body.

Time to Bruce Lee this bitch.

I jumped, lightened myself with gravity magic, and kicked his chest.

He barely flinched, trying to grab me out of the air. Thankfully, I had tricks even the best martial artists of my world couldn’t hope to replicate.

Rather than be forced to land after my last attack, I followed my attack with a platform under my feet. Pushing off of it, I flipped over the mountain of muscle, kicking the back of his skull on my way.

He stumbled forward slightly but swung his massive fist backwards and would have caught me with it had I not formed another platform to push off of.

Even as he turned around, I swung a kick at his back.

Rather than try and attack me again, he tried to gain some distance by jumping away.

I followed him, landing what blows I could, never giving him room to breathe. I did not touch the ground. For over five minutes, I pestered him from the air, flipping, flying, and being the most annoying and stinging bug I could be.

Float like a butterfly, sting like Ali.

But it wasn't enough.

Though I was able to hit him and avoid getting hit in turn, the generally accepted condition for winning a fight, I couldn't land any decisive blow. He was too tough, too thick for my punches or kicks to damage him unless I hit something vital.

So, I would have to make an opening to hit something vital.

Dropping to the ground for the first time in minutes, I pretended to pant for breath. As I expected, Hoarah Loux was eager to repay me in kind after weathering my attacks.

Sometimes a fight can be decided by one's mentality rather than their fist or blade.

He lunged, winding up his right arm in a move I knew would lead to a choke slam.

I ducked under the grab, getting close, knowing I had only one shot before he kicked me.

Purple lightning gathered around my fist, blasting out as I punched upwards. I aimed for that sweet spot above the stomach but below the sternum. The solar plexus.

Godfrey flinched as the air was driven from his chest.

With that opening, I punched out again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

I would like to say I tried to stifle the sounds that came out of my mouth while my fists fell like rain.

I would like to, but it would be a huge fucking lie.

I will, however, maintain that literally everyone else would have done the same in my position. Though their cry of choice might have been different.

"Oraoraoraoraoramudaoraoraoraoraoraora!" Temple. Nose. Chin. Jaw. Neck. Throat. Solar Plexus. Kidneys. I threw punch after punch, all empowered by gravity magic, at

some of the most vulnerable places on the human body, and the guy just would. Not. Fall. Down.

But he did stagger and flinch.

It was time to finish him.

Rather than coat my hand in gravity magic, I formed draconic claws. Fingers pressed into a tip, I plunged my hand below Godfrey's left ribs.

My hand snaked upwards, cutting its way under the natural defence of the ribcage, and reached its target.

With one last cry of 'Ora', I tore Hoarah Loux's heart from his chest in a fountain of blood.

The bastard was still standing, even without his heart. For a second, I thought he was like Greyoll and had more than one heart. Then he spoke, blood flaking his lips and beard.

"Brave Tarnished… Thy strength befits a crown."

He fell forward with a loud thud. The flames engulfing the Erdtree crackled as I panted for breath, covered in his blood.

"Was that necessary, my Dear Consort?" Ranni appeared at my side in her large doll.

"Necessary? No. Awesome? Yes?" I calmed my heartbeat, casting magic to clean myself as I approached the clothes I had discarded when I decided to match the first Elden Lord fist for fist.

Radahn had been my most exhausting fight. I had stayed awake for days, fighting, planning, and concentrating.

Malenia had been my most difficult fight. Ever. Despite being as skilled as I am, I had died at her hand more than any other being in existence.

Hoarah Loux? He had been the most fun I had in a fight. Period. I was still grinning as I tried to stuff my bloodlust-induced stiffy into my pants.

In my defence, that was as gay as I could possibly get since I wasn't a fan of the male form. There was something about a good fight that really got me going. Melina had been insensate for a week after the Festival of War.

I was never in danger of losing, even if I had already given most of my stuff to Raven. I was simply too strong, even without the Great Runes. The biggest reasons were my Inexaustable Trait and my new abilities with Miracles.

I had stayed away from them during Dark Souls because, hey, fuck the gods.

I needed to dabble in it, at least a little, for my plan with the dragon communion to work. So, how did I do it if I couldn't bring myself to have faith in the gods?

By following the classic shonen trope of believing in myself.

In all seriousness, I 'worshiped' my own draconic form. Absolute faith in a higher

power. Turns out religion has a lot in common with narcissism.

Who knew?

My religion, Mikael Mythology, involved rituals that called for healthy living, mutual respect, blood sports and worshiping the female form.

Hallelujah! Praise be!

With the ability to cast healing spells, not limited to using a seal, Soul and Blessed Talent, and an inexhaustible source of power? Anything that didn't kill me in seconds, I would regenerate from.

That just went to show how dangerous Malenia was. She would cut me to ribbons in moments, constantly slicing me so that I couldn't regenerate. Though it was lesser than mine, her regeneration had taught her everything she needed to know about how to kill me.

"Did you get what you wanted?" I asked as I put on my armour. I had given all my good stuff away to Raven, so it was simple stuff. I had chosen to keep a suit of armour taken from one of Godrick's soldiers. It had been the first full suit I had gotten in the Lands Between, and I had an extra set.

I was still grinning like a loon from the fight.

"I did," the Demi-god had turned her doll away while I dressed, but I had seen her soul peeking.

"What was it?"

"This."

For a second, I couldn't determine what I was looking at. A rune arc? I had plenty of those tiny shards of the Elden Ring that were nowhere near in power to a Great Rune.

Then I relaxed my eyes the rest came into focus.

"Is that…" I asked as I took a hesitant step closer.

"It is," Ranni sounded so adorably smug at seeing the surprised look that I wanted to tease her. I held back. I would let her have her moment. She deserved it.

"I thought you had discarded it?" I lightly reached out to the Great Rune, the only one I didn't own and had no hope of getting. Ranni slid it into my hands.

"What was once discarded may be retrieved once more."

A feeling of complete power flowed through me. A sense of unity, certainty and resolve overcame me. I knew, with utter confidence, that nothing could stand in my way. That I would succeed in everything, I did. I could regenerate a lost heart before. I could regrow my entire body now.

I could see why people would fight and die for this feeling.

This final boss fight would be a cakewalk.

******

“It’s time,” I said, standing from my place sitting on Marika’s corpse.

She was lucky she was already half dead when I arrived. After everything she put me through with Melina and Hewg I wouldn’t have killed her slowly.

I could feel the unique energy well up in me, indicating I had less than an hour before my next summoning. According to Medea, this meant that our timelines were intersecting.

“Very well,” I pretended not to hear the petulance in her voice. The fight with Radagon and the Elden Beast had been so easy that we had to kill time for a while. One had been half destroyed at the start, and the other had tried to fight me by inundating me with power.

I was a poor match-up for both of them.

I had decided to teach the Demi-god how to thumb wrestle while we waited.

Despite being twice as well-armed in the battle, she lost every time. Doll joints were inferior to genuine thumbs in the ring.

That and I cheated.

Ranni approached the severed head of Marika the Eternal. Lifting it above her head, she channelled her power through the corpse as it dissolved into light.

“To every living being and every living soul.”

Ranni did not speak loudly, but everyone in the world heard her.

In a destroyed town, a small Warrior Jar looked to the sky and the blue moon that covered it. The warrior voices were silent within the small form. Bairn, Alexander and Diallos recognized the man who towered over and stood behind the new goddess.

“Now cometh the age of the stars.”

The golden and red glow of the Erdtree, bathed in fire, flickered and faded. Unsupported by its god, the massive tree started to topple. Great branches and innumerable leaves fell down upon the ruined Capitol of Leyndell. The earth shook with their landing.

Wandering merchants worldwide played their sombre song, bathed in a blue glow, as they welcomed a new age.

“A thousand-year voyage under the wisdom of the Moon.”

The falling leaves told a story. A story of one man, a woman, and their steed against everything the Lands Between could throw at them.

Sellen, her watcher Jerren, Blaidd and Rennala watched the moon grow behind the Erdtree’s fall. Raya Lucaria was silent.

“Here beginneth the chill night that encompasses all, reaching the great beyond.”

A story of life and Death. Of madness and emotion. Of a man who fought for his freedom and a woman who would burn the world for her love.

Within Stormveil’s halls, refugees of the War of the Shattering resided. As one, they knelt in prayer to their new Elden Lord. To the man who had saved them.

“We go now into fear, doubt, and loneliness… As the path stretcheth into darkness, following our guiding moonlight.”

The dark moon shrunk, growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

After a minute, the two figures upon its face were but silhouettes.

After two minutes, it was but a star in the distance. One of countless others.

After three, no one could see the dark moon at all.

Factions stopped warring. The dead stayed dead. For the first time in millennia, the Lands Between were at peace as they gazed up at a sky unobstructed.

Stormveil would rebuild its power and reign over the lands in the coming years after forming an alliance with the Carian Queen of Raya Lucaria.

Destined Death, now part of life once more, would claim all eventually.

The War of the Shattering would fade into myth and legend as those who remembered it passed on. Stories would still be told of its participants, but most wouldn’t believe in them.

They were but a creation myth, made to explain how the world works.

Still, names were remembered.

Starscourge Radahn.

Malenia, Blade of Miquella.

Ranni, Goddess of the Guiding Moonlight.

And of the Elden Lord.

Mikael Godsbane. Mikael the Dragon. Mikael of the Clensing Flame.

Mikael the Free.

******

“Tis done,” Ranni said as she delivered her message to the world.

“Thanks for that,” I held her hand as the energy built within me. I only had a few minutes left. “Getting my name out there helps a lot.”

Strictly speaking, there was no need to time some things so precisely. I was just doing it to stack the deck in my favour.

“Certainly, my Lord Husband.”

I wasn't sure how I felt about her calling me that, but since I didn't have time to get into it, I let it slide for the moment.

Besides, considering what I was going to do, it was a bit ironic, and I loved a good bit of irony.

"You have everything?" I asked, despite knowing the answer. I had already given her the Godslaying Blade so she could bring it to the Island.

"I do." Her doll face was placid, but I could see the worry in her eyes.

"Don't worry," I held one of her right hands, the one without the ring, in my left. I gave it a squeeze for comfort. "Based on what happened with Priscilla and Torrent, you will just fall asleep and wake up there. Your clothes, items, and everything you hold will appear with you."

"I know." I sometimes wish she was flesh and blood so I could pinch those pouting cheeks. It wasn't the same when they were porcelain.

"You know," I said, distracting her. "In my home, when you are married, it is traditional to exchange rings. You already gave me yours after my fight with Godfrey, so I should give you mine."

I slid the shrunk form of the Elden Ring upon her bare ring finger as she stared at me in surprise.

I stumbled slightly as the feeling of power and absoluteness left me.

"My Lord!" Ranni held me in her arms, glowing with the power of the Elden Ring. "Why have thee given me the Elden Ring?"

"I told you, I have to give you a ring on our wedding day."

And I kissed her, nibbling on her lip as I did. I wasn't sure she even felt things from the few times I had kissed her, but she hadn't complained, so I didn't stop. It did nothing for me, as attractive as she was. She was inanimate. If I wanted to be crude about it, it was no different than a well-animated but cold sex doll.

It was more about her feelings than my pleasure.

She fell asleep in my arms, her body dissolving into the moonlight as she was transported to the Island.

Hopefully, I will see her there soon.

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My plan was both simple and complicated.

At its bare bones, using a summoning ritual any Fate fan would be aware of, I would be summoned into the Dragon that wrapped the Jeweled Island.

People could be summoned when still alive like Saber had been in the original FSN.

Spirits could be summoned into other bodies, like what happened to Jeanne in Apocrypha. Being called into my own body shouldn't be a problem at all.

Servants could also be summoned from both the past and future. From actual history and what-if histories. Even servants who were 'fictional' like Sherlock Holmes, Nursery Rhyme, and Moriarty could be summoned.

There was no reason I wouldn't be summonable so long as the conditions were right.

So I set out to stack as many things in my favour.

I spread my fame worldwide. The last few minutes with Ranni were just icing on a cake I had been baking for half a century.

I aligned my body, mind, and myth as closely as possible with the concept of 'dragon'.

The women of the Island had done their part too.

A ritual circle made of my own blood, carved by Medea and Scathach.

My favourite weapons and armour were used as catalysts.

Performed at the moment our timelines overlapped.

This summoning ritual was so specific that it was impossible to summon anyone but me.

I had stacked everything in my favour in this attempt at my freedom.

Everything worked out exactly as I had planned.

I should have been free as soon as I disappeared from the Lands Between.

I should have been free.

******

My eyes were closed, and I saw worlds.

I floated above them, little beads on an endless neckless.

Four worlds lay behind me. The first three were welded together to form one whole.

Infinite worlds stretched before me.

I knew what they were even without explanation.

They were cells.

An unending list of worlds to act as cells as I transferred from one to the other.

I left that chain of cells behind, called by power, words, and blood.

Moving yet standing still, I found myself not in front of an infinite chain of beads but an enormous Dragon wrapped around a Jewel.

Though I had been warned, I struggled to understand the sheer size of the beast in front of me.

I had seen big things before.

The Erdtree or Placidusax were the first that came to mind, though in my previous life, I had seen plenty of massive mountains such as the Rockies, Mt. Fuji, or the Alps.

It all paled in comparison to the white beast in front of me.

With no reference point in space, I couldn't accurately estimate its size. I could only see its complete profile because I 'flew' from so far away.

Most of the Jewel was hidden by its massive bulk, but I had a brief glimpse of an Island. Giant dragons, lesser than the white beast, slept upon it. Scales of black, gold, white, red, purple, blue, and green glittered under a red and blue light.

I had a moment to wonder about the colours of the beasts before the individual details were lost to me as I approached at incalculable speeds. Eventually, all blended together in a never-ending field of white scales.

As I 'approached', I could feel its bottomless well of power and recognized it for what it was.

It was Mine.

This Dragon was ME.

Joy filled me as I 'flew' closer to MY body.

My plan had worked perfectly. All that was left was to merge with a body already filled with my power.

Then I bounced off it.

Like a bouncy ball, I hit those white scales and rebounded at equal speed.

What!?

No.

No!

Nonononononononono!

Like someone had pressed rewind on a VHS, everything flowed in reverse.

The horizon of white scales retreated further and further away.

Eventually, I could make out a wing and limbs, and finally, I could see MY BODY in its complete glory.

Then it started to shrink in the distance.

As I was pulled into the fifth bead in an infinite chain, I screamed a soundless scream of rage, pain, and fury.

The Dragon, without waking, idly scratched the spot where something had stung him.

Space was supposed to be mostly empty. Why were there so many things that tried to bother him?

Stupid meteors.

At least it wasn't the bird again. That thing was too damn frisky for its own good.

Uncaring about the world around him, the Dragon continued to enjoy his Dream while it could. He luxuriated in being with those who were His after so long apart. Even after millions of years, he never tired of their presence so close.

Still, the Dragon was looking forward to the appointed time.

It was almost time to wake up.

Author's Note:

… In my defence, I wrote the Godfrey fight while listening to my Jojo workout mix.

In all seriousness, this chapter is being released a day early because I am already working on the final chapter of Volume 1. I will release that one on Monday and the Epilogue, next Friday.

This marks the end of Elden Ring and, as a whole, I am happy with how it turned out. The experiences Mikael went through here will shape him in the time to come, up to the end of the story. Mikael isn't completely recovered, both from the loss of Melina and his trust issues, that is not how trauma works, but he is trying at least. Ranni's support came at a crucial time. We'll see where he goes.

We also get a wider view of his situation. The exact details will be explored in the last chapter, released on Monday, the Epilogue, next Friday, and then a side story which I will release at some point afterward.

Finally, I would like to apologize to my readers.

As I said, I am currently writing the final parts of volume 1. While doing so, I realized it came out extremely complicated. As the author, I feel everything is simple and can be boiled down to a few key points but you, as the readers are only seeing the tangled net of plot threads, layers of viewpoints, complicated motivations and convoluted lies. I try and explain what I can, as plainly as I can, without being bogged down too much. My hope is that it will all make sense by the end of volume 1. I had originally intended this part of the story the 'prologue' to be Mikael and the Island's Origin Story. It is a personal failing of mine that I tend to overcomplicate things. As it is, I've cut huge portions that I had initially planned in order to simplify things. Those parts were not necessary. Things are still a bit complicated, but I hope they are at least coherent.

I'll see you all Monday for the last chapter of Part 4.

PS: Yes, I know Miquella's great rune is not in the game. I put it here because it makes sense it would be in the chrysalis with him. If DLC comes out to present more information, I will come back and edit this part.

Break Out

BREAK OUT

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

"Fuck!" I screamed as I awoke.

I recognized the clinic right away.

Bloodborne.

As a rule of thumb, I wasn't a very wrathful person. I got annoyed with others plenty of times, but I wasn't a furious person by nature.

Sadistic? Certainly.

Petty? The pettiest.

But I rarely got really mad, and when I did, I usually channelled it to further my goals.

Even at my lowest point, when Melina had just died and I wanted to inflict violence upon the world, I sought specific targets to further my goals rather than return to Limgrave and burn the countryside. The latter would have been easier but pointless in the long run.

Crash!

So you can imagine how pissed off I was when I started tearing the room to pieces as soon as I woke up.

"Fuck!" I shouted again as I flipped the gurney I had been lying on. I was in an unenhanced body, so it was difficult, but my rage lent me strength. Wood splintered as the heavy object tipped on its side with a heavy bang. "I was right there!"

The frame of the doorway shattered as I kicked the handle.

"That was my body. MY BODY!"

Glass shattered as I swept a table of the vials and beakers that covered it.

"I was free!"

I grabbed an IV stand and smashed around the room. Over and over, until the metal bent and my hand shook from the rebound.

“God Damn It!” I shouted in pain and rage as the bent metal shattered in my hands, shards flying around the room and into my arm.

A rumbling growl rolled behind me.

I whirled, snarling at whoever had disturbed my venting.

A scourge beast was hunched in the doorway.

Attracted by my yelling, it had climbed the stairs and found the door open from my kick.

Perfect.

It lunged at me, mouth open to tear me to pieces.

I shoved my hand in its open maw.

It bit down, teeth digging deep into the flesh of my upper arm, but it didn’t have the leverage to tear it from me.

The pain was nothing compared to my rage.

My other hand drove the shattered end of the IV stand into its fucking eye.

It snarled in pain, claws swiping at my face and arms as it flailed through its death throes.

It died quickly as I impaled it over and over, plunging my improvised weapon down into its other eye, throat, and chest. As it stilled, I plowed the metal repeatedly into the dead beast, covering myself in its blood.

Over and over, dozens of times, I vented my frustration upon the wolf’s body.

By the time I stopped, panting from breath, the scourge beast was a lump of flesh, fur, and blood.

I threw the bloody piece of metal away, my wounds healing as the blood covering my form was absorbed.

“Ok,” I said to myself, panting. “Ok. We were close. So close! So what went wrong?” I sat in the corner of the destroyed room as I calmed my heartbeat and rage. “What worked and what didn’t? What do I know now that I didn’t before? We tested a hypothesis, and it didn’t work. That’s how science gets made. We only need it to work once. A million failures are irrelevant if I make a million and one attempts. And I have all the time in the world.”

That was both a good thing and a bad thing.

If I was to trust what I saw in that ‘vision quest’, I would be stuck in a never-ending jail. This could be a good thing, I told myself.

Not the eternal imprisonment, that was bad, but what it meant for gaining my freedom.

If I was alone and the Island and the Dragon were not a factor, my never-ending

progression through Soulsborne games could be seen as an eternal damnation situation.

But the Island did exist, as did the women on it and the Dragon, which meant whoever set this up wanted things this way. I wasn't the sole factor here.

More than that, I had actually gotten out of Elden Ring and seen the Chain.

Though the ending had been a fop, I had been free of my prison for a short while, which meant the ritual had worked.

Which meant escape was possible.

When I thought about it, there were two possibilities.

Either someone had set this eternal damnation of myself, the women on the Island and wasted all the effort, time, and materials on something with no payout. I considered this highly unlikely as I was nowhere near significant enough to matter to someone who could set this all up.

Or.

I was meant to escape, and each world was another chance to do something that led to that end.

So, following that logic, how could I escape?

As connected as they were, my time in the Dark Souls worlds had been a waste of time.

I thought I would be released from jail after serving my sentence.

I knew now I should have pulled a Shawshank and tried to dig a hole with a spoon. If I was being generous, then the entire trilogy was a training montage before shocking me with Elden Ring as a way to tell me to get off my ass and escape already.

So, now I needed to organize what I knew about my situation, including the information I had learned in the last few minutes. (Hours/years/lightyears? How does one quantify travelling outside a multidimensional prison and through the void of space?)

I shook my head from the silly thought. I needed to focus. If I knew the rules of the game, then I could win.

First off, what went wrong?

That was easy to understand once I gave it a little thought. I had tried to be summoned into a body that I already inhabited. I knew I was connected to the Dragon. Emma had proved that. I figured my consciousness could still move from the body I inhabited at the end of Elden Ring to the one floating in space.

Looking back at the idea, I realized how silly the idea had been. It was like trying to put on a pair of pants that you were already wearing. It didn't make a lick of sense.

So, now that I knew the point of failure, what could I do differently?

Be summoned to the Island directly? That might work, but all it would accomplish is

to trap me with the women. I'd leave that as a last resort.

What else do I know about my situation?

I had to focus all my attention on how things had been present from the start.

Priscilla, the floofy dragon she was, had shown me that it didn't matter who I bound or how many. They couldn't affect me, and I couldn't affect them. Everything set up was based solely on the women I had 'purchased' and myself.

So, what were the game's rules that had been consistent from the get-go?

First, the women of the Island can only help indirectly.

That had been a constant throughout this entire time. While on my side of the gate, they could not influence or touch the world. They could use their abilities fine and could still sense things around them, but the most significant threat they posed was with their words.

Which, to be fair, was a rather significant threat to me.

The second point was that the Catalogue was fucked.

While it was something that had been evident from the get-go, a few things stood out now that I looked back on it. The best way to evaluate what I knew of the new situation with the WC was to look at the most significant change.

The Defences.

When I first wrote that story, I focused on min-maxing four aspects. DDTW. Dragon. Defence. Talent. Waifus.

I had limited myself to ten waifus and chosen them after careful thought. I'm not going to lie and say my dick didn't have a say. It certainly did, but I had been trying to focus on realistic choices since I wouldn't be controlling them. I had chosen primarily heroes or those who worked with heroes because they would be more cooperative. After that, I narrowed the focus to those with traits that would lessen the cost of the defences. From there, I focused on utility after getting a few powerhouses.

Everything I had purchased was present, except for the defences. Those were the only things gone. On top of that, extra items were bought that I had never purchased. If I did the math, easy enough since the memories of the costs were carved into my mind, then I had spent about 450 points on Defenses. That was due to Dragon heritage giving me a ton for free. I then halved that cost by purchasing waifus that gave discounts.

The cost of the Island alone was worth more than I was missing in points.

I had thought up various possibilities over the years, such as the waifus coming 'used' and at a discount, but even that didn't make up for the sheer amount of points spent on the Island.

So, where was the extra currency coming from?

And why were defences removed?

What about them specifically was so crucial that whoever set this up would allow me to become immortal through miracles but wouldn't let me the simple peace of Mind Defence? The one I wanted more than any other. As far as I know, it would provide no advantage in any Soulsborne world.

I shook off the aggravating spiral my thoughts were going through and refocused on what else I knew.

The third and final point I confirmed recently was that I wasn't being teleported to new worlds. My spirit was. The bodies all looked the same for the most part, but I could feel the difference in each one. Little scars from the most potent foes disappeared between worlds. Different locations of freckles or birthmarks. The bodies all looked like me as if someone found the closes approximation they could, but it wasn't exactly correct.

When I entered a new world as a level one wretch, or whatever the equivalent was, I wasn't being weakened and put there. Instead, I was leaving an old body behind and entering a new one.

Early on, when I heard about the Dragon that slept around the Island, I was afraid that someone else was in that body. My fears had been mitigated with the Emma incident, as she had managed to connect to it through me.

Of course, a much bigger problem was discovered then, but the worry of an imposter moving my meat suit had been put to rest. The theory of me hopping bodies was reinforced when the Soul of Cinder assumed my form in that final fight.

It was confirmed when I faced the Dragon around the Jewel. While I had not possessed the body, I could sense its power.

And it had been Mine.

My power. My magic. My fire. All super charged and wrapped up in a massive gift box I couldn't open.

I kicked a table over before taking a deep breath and calming down.

When had I started pacing?

No matter.

I could summarise everything I knew under those three umbrella statements.

So, what did it all mean?

What unifying thread tied all those three together, and how could I use it to escape?

Was there a unifying thread at all?

There had to be.

I was a big believer in cosmic coincidences. Sometimes things just happen through the complex nature of chaos.

When I first appeared in that cell all those centuries ago, I thought that I had been a victim of one of those. Fallen through the cracks between dimensions and left to rot. Initially, I had taken the command seals as an extension of my Dark Sign.

Over the years and after everything I learned, it was clear that all this was deliberate. Someone had put me in this situation. Thus, there was a thread of logic here that I wasn't grasping. Even if I didn't know the 'Why', if I could piece out the 'What', I would be able to solve the mystery.

Let's simplify it to the extreme.

Intangible waifus. Messed up Catalogue. Dragon Body and wandering spirit.

Waifus. Catalogue. Dragon.

Waifus. Catalogue. Dragon.

Waifus. Catalogue. Dragon.

I paced in that sick room for minutes, muttering under my breath, my frustration mounting.

Then I was struck by an epiphany.

It wasn't waifus, catalogue, dragon.

It was waifus, defences, dragon.

Once I had that thought, the puzzle fell into place.

Piece by agonizing piece.

I felt sick and nauseous. I broke out into a cold sweat, my limbs trembling. The room was spinning, and I leaned on a cabinet to steady myself.

Horror overcame me as I realized how I could free myself.

One time, and once only, those three factors came together.

Robin had explored the outside of the Dragon's body (intermittently due to the nature of space and her abilities) but could not provoke a response from it.

Only once had one of the women drawn a response from the great beast. Something only possible because of my lack of defences.

I shook in fear as I realized what I needed to do.

******

Ranni awoke to sensation.

For the first time in centuries, she could feel.

She could feel the silken sheets under her body and smell the fresh linen. She could feel the press of the covers. She could feel the warmth of the blanket and the cool air.

Ranni lay there for minutes, luxuriating in the feelings.

Not since she had discarded her flesh had sensation been a part of her life. No pain, hunger, taste, touch, or smell had been part of her life since she had killed her body and cast aside the carcass upon that Divine Tower. She felt neither cold nor heat. Even the touch of her Lord Husband, his embrace and kiss, were images she could see but not feel.

After minutes, a realization came, and Ranni sat up in surprise.

Looking down, she breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the four blue arms similar to that of her teacher, the Snow Witch.

For a moment, the Goddess of the Chill Moon had feared that she was in her original flesh, and Mikael would not be able to identify her. Though a part of her was disappointed that she wouldn't be able to hold her taller body against the man.

He often teased her about her height.

Looking around the room, Ranni realized it was modelled after her own chambers in Raya Lucaria from her youth. Luxuriously appointed and filled with books. There were a few devices, electronics she knew, that were new.

As the blue-skinned woman dressed, revelling in the feeling of good fabric, she cast a few spells. Her storage still contained all it had before, such as the Godslaying and Fingerslaying blades. The dolls, both her larger one and the miniature one Mikael had carried, were now pointless, but Ranni decided to keep them for sentimentality purposes.

Ranni's magic, more potent than ever due to her ascension and her Lord Husband's gift, worked as usual. Though she was a bit surprised she could still split her spirit from her flesh if she wished. This new flesh acted as a more comfortable and powerful doll than a body.

Ranni didn't care about that. At least she could consummate her marriage now.

Assured of her power and ability to fulfill her wifely duties now that she possessed a beating heart, the Goddess set out to find the other inhabitants of the Island.

With any luck, she would also find her Lord.

Her room was one of six in the hall, and beyond was a landing. On the opposite side were an identical hall and a set of double doors between the two corridors. Ranni descended the nearby stairs and made her way outside from the foyer.

Seeing and hearing no one, Ranni realized the ritual would have been cast while outside in case of any accidents.

Stepping from the front door, Ranni looked skywards as light bathed the mansion on the hill.

Two moons hung there.

The first was familiar. It was a ring of pale blue with a dark center. Snow-like particles flittered across it. Within the black middle were rings of gold intertwined in a

symbol that matched the one on her lower right hand's ring finger. The Elden Ring and the Dark Moon would forever follow her now, symbols of her Order.

A symbol of her Lord Husband and her union.

The Chill Moon was at its zenith, covering a fifth of the sky and bathing the world in a pale blue glow.

The other moon was much smaller and was still rising.

The Blood Moon was on the horizon, touching the western sea. Its red glow covered the Island in a dreary light.

As Ranni stared at the red orb, head tilted in curiosity, she realized something.

That was no moon.

Really, what sort of Island had Mikael sent her to?

Looking around, Ranni spotted a familiar Spirit Steed in a field in the distance.

Torrent was grazing lazily, surrounded by four red drakes of impressive size. The draconic beings towered over the horned horse but seemed wary to approach. One would get close, sniffing Torrent in curiosity before backing away. Another would repeat the action and so on.

Ranni looked on in curiosity before, like her Lord Husband, shrugging her shoulders. If Torrent had no problem with them, then she wouldn't either. The Spirit Steed was the best judge of character the Goddess had ever met.

Looking beyond the animals, Ranni spotted a gathering of women and started to make her way toward them. They were not too far from the mansion, set out in a circle in the field beyond the orchard.

As she approached, the Goddess got her first good look at her Lord Husband's consorts.

They were of various sizes, hair and skin colours, and clothing. Ranni knew they were all 'fictional' figures from Mikael's mythology and were all women of skill and power. A part of her was jealous of some of the figures. Their height, of course, as some were of a height or even taller than her Lord, but more than that, she was envious of their full figures. A few of the blondes' bodies had Ranni looking at her own in petulance.

Baring their beauty, the only unifying factor of these women was their position.

To a woman, they all surrounded a complex magic circle carved into the ground. Blades, weapons, and armours dotted the circle's edge, and the entire site glowed with a familiar red power.

Mikael's blood had been used here.

The women were positioned equidistant from each other and facing the west.

They stood, as still as statues, watching the Blood Moon rise.

Every woman there had at least one hand resting upon their navel.

Ranni stared at the eery scene.

Was this… part of the summoning ritual Mikael had spoken of?

The only sound in the night was the waves of the ocean.

Ranni did not want to risk disturbing her Lord's summoning, but after half an hour of standing there and nobody but her moving, she decided to risk it.

"Was it a success? Is he free?"

Like a stone thrown in a calm pond causes ripples, Ranni's questions stirred a response. With perfect synchronicity, eleven women turned to face her.

They stared at her as one, and, for one moment, she thought they would attack.

Then the moment was gone, and the women blinked at her in surprise.

The tallest, a draconic woman in white, was the first to gather her wits as the rest stumbled and shook their head.

"Who art thou?" A scythe appeared in her hand, brandished in the Goddess' direction. In that blade, Ranni could sense a power similar to Destined Death.

"Ranni?" The one who answered the tall woman's question was a dark-haired woman in purple. "When did you get here? Where's Mikael?"

"Tis what I wish to know," Ranni replied, eyeing the group speculatively. She could put faces to names on a few of them based on Mikael's description.

"The ritual worked. I felt it latch on to him." The woman who Ranni was sure was Medea was eyeing the circle. The greek witch turned to look skyward. "The second moon is new and blocking my view of the Dragon. Is this your doing?"

"Tis the representation of our Order."

"You'll have to explain that to me later," Medea looked over at the dark-haired woman in purple who had recognized Ranni. "Robin, could you cast a few eyes on the dragon? I don't think it woke up, but I would rather be sure. Something went wrong at the end."

"Sure," Robin closed her eyes, arms crossed over her chest. "Nothing's changed. It's still asleep."

"Scathach, Raven, do you two mind coming here? I want to run as many diagnostics as I can. If we try this again, I want it to work." Two of the women met Medea, though Ranni didn't know who was which.

She didn't have time to ask as she was approached by two other women, a blonde and a brunette. Both wore breastplates, open at the top to not inhibit their breathing. Ranni fought not to stare at their chests enviously.

"Apologies for the confusion," the blonde said. "We knew to expect you, but we were

rather excited to see Sir Mikael. I am Artoria Pendragon. This is Diana. Would you like to return to the mansion? We can talk while the others work on the spell."

"A pleasure," Diana said. Her eyes roamed Ranni's more diminutive form in evaluation. What sort of conclusion the woman made, the Goddess couldn't tell, but she did recognize the two names.

King Arthur and Wonder Woman.

Mikael had talked of these two, as well as Scathach, as his 'heavy hitters'. With one of them, he claimed to be able to conquer the Lands Between in a few years. With two of them, he could do it in under one.

With all three?

A month, at most.

Ranni could respect that strength, but she also needed them to know her own position.

"I am sure we have much to discuss, and I look forward to our relationship while we work to free my Lord Husband."

It was like Ranni had slapped all eleven women in the face simultaneously. They all whirled to look at her. Some with wide eyes, some with frowns, and some with glares.

The two in front of her kept their expressions courteous, though the Goddess could see their eyes twitching.

"Yes," Artoria said, her lips pursed and eyes stony. "We have much to discuss. And plenty of time to do it."

It was a well-informed guess on Artoria's part.

Not counting the time while Mikael was between worlds, the man took a while to conquer any new world. To keep track and help with her calculations, Medea had set up an exact count of the times it took.

Dark Souls 1 took ninety-six days from first summoning to last.

Two took sixty-six days.

Three was completed the quickest after twenty-nine days.

Elden Ring?

Due to the size of the countries involved and Mikael's unfamiliarity with the source material, it took longer than the other three worlds combined.

One hundred and ninety-eight days.

For the women of the Island, it had been over a year. They had arrived in the late summer on the Island, and it was now mid-fall. Where the mansion was located wasn't affected by the time of year, but the rest of the Island was very seasonal.

By now, all the women were very familiar with each other. Even Raven, the most

introverted of them, considered the others some of her best friends. She only spent every third day locked up in her room now. She was practically an extrovert.

Despite having many strong personalities in the group, most disagreements were ironed out early in their entrapment. After the blowup with Emma, when Mikael started using command seals, it was commonly agreed to cease conflict to further their goal.

Some were lovers, some were not. Nobody fought besides little disagreements or during a spar. They spent most of their time together.

Mikael would comment later that it sounded like an all-woman sitcom.

If Artoria was generous with her estimation of Mikael, which she always was, she thought he would finish within three weeks if he was familiar with the world. If he wasn't? Around the three-month mark.

Plenty of time to study the ritual, get to know Ranni, allow the blue woman to fit in with the group, and find out precisely what the man had been up to in the Lands Between.

The women of the Island knew something significant had happened, but Mikael had not told them anything of the matter.

All of them were looking forward to grilling Ranni on the subject, though there was no rush.

The entire group was surprised when, the next day, Mikael stopped slowing down the summoning, and they were called every three hours rather than every six.

He remained quiet on why, but the women agreed it was a good thing they would be able to see him once every two days rather than wait three and a half.

They thought he was warming up to them.

In a way, they were right. But they didn't have much time to realize the reasons for his behaviour change.

At noon, on the second day after the failed summoning ritual.

It happened when Emma was summoned to the new world for the first time.

The Island shook.

Yoruichi and Scathach, who were exploring the mountains for any changes that might have occurred since the traversal to the new world, would give the most detailed account of what happened.

They were slaughtering a group of werewolf-type enemies that hadn't been on the Island before. They planned to bring their bodies to Medea and Tsunade for their experiments when, as one, their foes froze.

Their lupine bodies, over the course of less than a second, dissolved into a bloody mist.

Only due to the dynamic vision these women cultivated all their lives could they

observe what happened next.

Yoruichi would describe the crimson spikes that rose from Scathach's red hair like a crown. She would remember the surprise on the Servant's face as scales covered it and her eyes slit. She would vividly depict the speed of the blood-like thorns that sprouted over the warrior queen's body.

Scathach, in turn, would speak of the black fur that covered Yoruichi. At first, the Witch of Dun Scath thought the shinigami was turning to her cat form, but then she noticed the differences. The mouth elongated, unlike a cat, but in a familiar draconic snout. A sinuous tail, covered in scales, grew out of her back.

Both would recall watching the other dissolve into a pale light even as the transformation continued.

Throughout the Island, all life forms would disappear in less than a second.

Some, the wild monsters that called the Island home, would dissolve into a bloody mist.

Others, like Dun Stallion, Torrent, and the four young drakes, would simply close their eyes as their bodies shimmered and vanished.

All but one of the Island's women would find themselves undergoing transformations as they shimmered in a pale light and disappeared.

Ranni, the only one not transforming, would have time to briefly wonder why Tsunade had turned into a green dragon while giving her a check-up before vanishing. Ranni would disappear as well, though in a less dramatic fashion.

The Island, now void of all sapient life, would shake itself apart, shattering into chunks that would dissolve like sea foam on the beach.

The Jewel, its glittering surface reflecting every colour possible, and some that weren't, would pop like a bubble.

As for the Dragon?

It had already faded.

Of the Island and the world the women called home for over a year, whatever remnants remained disappeared quickly.

Like the memories of a long forgotten Dream.

******

I was old.

While much of my personality remained the same, due to my memories of my past life never fading, there was no denying the weight the years had on me.

I often lamented the fact that the worlds I visited were so realistic. If I was in a game world, I wish all the exploits, glitches, mechanics, and other things I knew well would work as they did in the games.

They didn't.

I couldn't give an exact time frame for obvious reasons, but I spent too long in these games because they were needlessly realistic.

Take Dark Souls 1, for example.

Anor Londo was a city built by and made for gods that towered over humans. It made sense that their city would be incomparable in size to one made by mortals. More than that, the souls series was pretty linear in nature. Of course, there were detours and optional areas, but by and large the game followed a set route.

The general path was the same as the game. Getting to the top of Sen's Fortress after ringing the bells would bring you to Anor Londo. From there, I needed to find my way to Gwynevere. But there was no convenient path along the rooftops.

Why would there be?

Bonfires were days or weeks apart by travel, and any death would set me back. The city was teeming with defenders. That wasn't even counting the 'boss runs'. Ornstein and Smough alone had stopped my progress for over a year.

And that was Anor Londo alone.

The world's largest city was built at the mountain's base to be closer to the gods. Below that had been places like Blightown, New Londo, the Catacombs, Lost Izalith, and others. It made sense that games would only be able to show a small slice of a world.

Strictly speaking, it was an outstanding achievement to defeat Gwyn in only a quarter of a century. I had never held a cold weapon before escaping that cell and still managed to slay some of the greatest warriors the world had produced. It was due to my Talents, but I still felt a tiny bit of pride at the feat.

Dark Souls 2 took less time because, even though places were farther apart, I was a much better fighter and died less. Travel times were a bitch, but I had completed all the DLCs and reached Nashandra in under seventeen years. I had spent a few centuries travelling the world afterwards before returning to sit upon the Throne of Want. If we counted that time, I spent the most time in DS2.

From talking to Robin when I awoke in the Cemetery of Ash, I knew it had only been a week or so on their end.

I tried not to think about what that meant for how long I stayed in the fires of the First Flame after killing Gwyn.

The third game took the least time, with all the lands converging on Lothric and my

increased skills. I faced the Soul of Cinder about seven years after I started.

Elden Ring was a completely different beast.

First of all, I had no idea what I was doing.

I didn't know the 'critical path' to mainline the game. I did everything I could by the end because I didn't want to miss anything that would lead to a 'bad end'. I failed to save Melina, but I didn't want to fail anyone else.

Second of all, Elden Ring was home to at least six fucking countries. Some places, like the Weeping Peninsula and the Haligtree, weren't the size of the others, but these had been warring nations. Each had ruins of towns, mines that supplied material to armies, supply caravans, forts at choke points, and castles at the seat of their powers.

I could teleport to any place with a site of Grace I had attuned myself to, but the distance between those points and finding them meant I spent a massive amount of time on travel alone.

If it wasn't for Best Boi Torrent, I would have needed to count the time spent in Lands Between centuries rather than decades. As it was, it still almost took me fifty years to reach Marika.

I explain this to put things into perspective.

I was a veteran with centuries of experience combating forces strong enough to be considered gods. I had fought in places no mortal could withstand under the worst conditions imaginable. I had travelled across countries and cities built by gods.

Yharnam was like nothing I had faced before.

There was an aesthetic difference certainly. Gone was western medieval fantasy, and it was replaced by Victorian and Lovecraftian horror. No armour and no magic.

The most significant difference, to me, was in scale.

Yharnam had been built by mortal hands for mortal lives. In the last half-century or so, there were some supernatural influences from the discoveries of Byrgenwerth and the Healing Church, but those were relatively recent developments.

Even if every inhabitant of Yharnam became a beast and came at me at once, it would still be fewer enemies than in the Undead Burg alone.

Bloodborne was the story of one mortal city and a few nearby settlements. It had a wonderful ambiance, great themes, and memorable stories. It was tied with Dark Souls 1 as my favourite game of all time.

I cared for none of it.

I slaughtered my way through Yharnam.

There was no better way to put it.

I tore my way through its inhabitants. I ripped them to shreds and bathed in their

blood. I found Gascoigne and the Tomb of Oedon within half a day of waking up in the clinic.

I hacked him to pieces using an ordinary axe, taken from the corpse of a citizen.

From there, things snowballed as I gained access to more tools to aid my Hunt. Though I was no longer undead, I needed neither food nor sleep as the Dream sustained me.

By the end of the second day, I had slain several bosses, including Vicar Amelia, and was making my way to Byrgenwerth.

I was delayed a bit due to the Nightmare Frontier being larger than expected, but I managed to kill Rom on the sixth day.

When Scathach was summoned on the seventh day, she found me sitting upon the One Reborn.

It took me almost half a century to kill the Elden Beast.

I squished Mergo, and its Wetnurse, within ten days.

Even spending time rescuing everyone I could, I still managed to 'beat' the game within a fortnight.

Then I had time to kill, waiting to summon one specific woman.

I entered the Hunters Nightmare and put its inhabitants to rest. Hunter and Kin.

That took me five days.

I still had five weeks to kill, so I dived into the twisting labyrinths of the Chalice Dungeons below the city.

From waking up in the clinic to facing the Moon Presence, in those seven weeks, I never died once.

I kept up my Hunt even as I delved deeper and deeper.

I didn't need to think of my plan if I was fighting and killing.

I would be wracked with fear and panic if I stopped for as little as ten minutes. I would start making excuses, trying desperately to find an alternative to what I saw as the only escape plan that would work.

No luck.

No matter how I rolled it over in my head, I could find no other alternative.

I needed Emma.

I waited in fear and terror for the one woman who could free me.

Or doom me.

******

Emma Frost.

Mutant. Hero. Villain.

She was a complicated character at the best of times. She was also the exception to the rule concerning my choices of Waifus.

The closest to a villain beside her was Medea, and anyone who knows even the basics of her myth knows that she was more a victim than a true antagonist. (She just happened to be a powerful woman, which the greeks saw as the equivalent of being a monster.)

On the other hand, Emma was a complete antagonist in some timelines. Even in ones where she was a 'hero', she was a manipulative and cunning woman who did whatever she thought was necessary to get her way.

When writing the initial story, I judged I needed a communication specialist. Coordinating between so many people over large distances would be necessary.

The Soulsborn series was as low-tech as possible without going downright neanderthal. Without Science or Engineering Talent, any tech would be up to the Waifu to maintain or build. It made more sense to go for an ability. That also had the perk of providing discounts on a few of the Defenses.

Ironically enough, I narrowed my options to Jean Grey or Emma Frost. There were other telepaths I could choose, but they each had their own problems.

I preferred Jean in most continuities, but in others, I couldn't stand how she was used as a Mcguffin. Her benefit was she was also able to help with her telekinesis. Emma was more consistent in her portrayal and physically tougher with her diamond form.

Ultimately, I decided to go with Emma because I knew what I was getting, and my Defences would mitigate the worst she could do.

The short story I wrote was about ten thousand words. We would be in Dark Souls 1 for a few days, then we'd all go home with a few benefits.

The greatest plans of mice and men.

Emma knew all this.

I had let her read my mind for years. So long as nobody was controlled or had a personality wiped, I didn't have a problem with the standard telepathic abilities.

She had been the one closest to me for decades. I had trusted her to give me mental evaluations and counselling. Bound by my command seal, we explored the various mental effects I was under. I could have kept her out of my mind after the first few years due to my Mental Talent, but I had extended her my trust.

I had lied to all the other women for over forty years. Heroes, characters I admired, liked and who professed their love to me, were manipulated.

With Emma, I could ensure they all got along with each other. She was also a massive

help in providing Dark Souls residents with happy ends.

While our conspiracy was born of my fear and desire for protection, I sincerely wanted everyone to get out of this situation in the best shape possible. Partly due to the love forced on me but also because that was the type of person I was.

I went for Good Ends rather than True Ends.

Even Emma, once we were free and I was far enough away to not be at risk, would have been released from all her Commands.

Ultimately, she would return home immortal, with a perfect body, talents that most could never dream of, a perfectly safe home, and more power than ever.

I could see no reason for her not to work with me.

We all would go home happy.

Our relationship happened by accident, but she had been the only one I could truly confide in and trust.

I cannot exaggerate how much Emma's betrayal hurt me.

She had orchestrated everything, going along with my whims of helping the women of the Island, all so she could turn them to her side. Wonder Woman herself had begged me to free her from my Commands.

As if I wanted any of this!

As if Diana hadn't already doomed me to burn for millennia with no hope for rest!

I wasn't one to begrudge Emma for wanting to be free, but I had already promised that freedom to her. She had seen my mind. She knew I was being genuine!

I would never have known that all the women of the Island were free to order me around if Diana hadn't gotten frustrated with the subterfuge.

If I had been afraid before then, I became paranoid after.

Emma was too valuable to cut off completely, especially since I was unfamiliar with Elden Ring, but I could not return to trusting her with my thoughts and plans.

I'm sure she had her own plans and schemes.

Why did she want all the women on her side when she would be the only one returning to the Marvel world?

Why had she waited to have Medea free her instead of doing it the day after I first Commanded her?

Why wait for everyone to reach tier 7?

Why would she only free herself of my commands right before we thought we would be free?

I never asked her those questions.

I couldn't trust her to answer truthfully unless I was willing to use a command spell,

and even then, I'm sure she would twist my Command to something that benefitted her.

So yes, Emma Frost and I had a complicated relationship.

Whoever set her as the key to my freedom had royally fucked me over.

******

Emma watched Mikael fight Gehrnam.

It had only been two days since her last summoning. She hoped his willingness to stop pushing them away was a sign they were getting through to him.

That they loved him.

That they did not want to be left behind.

After learning about his time in the Lands Between from Ranni, many of the women of the Island felt more strongly for their summoner than ever.

You didn't need to be a mind reader to know how 'healing a wounded soul' could be a romantic fantasy.

After Melina, they knew he could love. They just needed to prove that he did not need to fear them. That Mikael could trust them.

One day, Mikael would be free. No one on the Island doubted that.

The question was, what came after?

The women had no home but the Island.

No family but the one they had built for themselves in that great Jewel.

While they had gone a little stir crazy over the last year, they had been able to keep up their spirits due to their mutual support and goal.

Should Mikael leave them behind one day, Emma was sure many would collapse.

Herself included.

Which made his behaviour so unnerving right now.

When the mutant had been first summoned, Mikael had been waiting.

That wasn't new.

Ever since that disastrous summoning where he 'freed' Emma of her obligations, he was always ready for them with his Command on his lips.

'Never give me an order!'

Only… he did not Command her.

Mikael stood there, eyeing her for over a minute. Brown eyes stared at her with enough intensity to make her shiver.

Emma saw love in those eyes.

The Love she desperately wanted to feel again.

She also saw fear.

A terror so complete that he shook with it.

He was biting his lips hard enough that they bled. His fists were clenched and shaking.

After a minute of staring without saying a word, he stopped shaking and took a deep breath.

Though Emma could not read his mind anymore, she had seen it enough to know the little ritual. The little mantra he told himself to gather his courage. She could imagine the words.

One. Two. Three. Fuck It!

"Keep the gate open and follow me," he bit out, turning from her and walking through the iron gate. It wasn't a Command.

It wasn't a Command!

Emma allowed the smirk to cover her face as she followed behind the man.

Technically, she was still bound from the last time she had been summoned. Medea never freed any of them from the Commands Mikael gave. None of the women told him that, not that he would believe them if told. Trust, once lost, was hard to gain again.

The fact that he was willing to go without ordering her once more might have been only the first step, but it was the most important one.

Now, she only had to prove herself and the others worthy of his trust and one day, far in the future, they would not be left behind when he was free.

That small measure of trust, plus watching the fight, had put the White Queen in an excellent mood. Her breath was coming in deep bursts. Her panties were even getting a little wet.

She always liked her men to be the most powerful or dangerous people in a room. She was curious why he wanted the gate open but didn't question it. From what she knew, he had passed a bunch of stuff through Glynda a few hours ago. Did he have more?

A layman watching the fight would think the fighters were evenly matched. They traded dozens of blows, neither seeming to have an advantage. Emma knew Mikael enough to know when he was playing with his food.

He must completely outclass this man.

Though her summoner was still a blank wall to the mutant's abilities, Gehrman the First Hunter was an open book.

Through his eyes, she saw Mikael fight. Using the weapon of his favourite disciple. Fighting in the same way as the woman he loved.

"Why?" Gehrman growled in fury as his weapon was deflected upon the Rakuyo's

smaller blade. “Why are you mocking her? Why are you tormenting me?”

“I’m not,” Mikael said calmly. He spoke with supreme confidence. He wasn’t even a little out of breath after minutes of combat. There was no chance of him losing. Emma’s nipples could cut glass. “I just figured it was appropriate. She would have wanted you to be put to rest. To end the night. It is not my place to judge you, nor do I want to. Whether you take this as mockery or not is up to you.”

It seemed like Mikael was in a philosophical mood.

He got like that sometimes, Emma knew, when his mood turned for the worst.

She had never seen him mad, only contemplative.

Even when he locked her from his mind.

Nevertheless, Gehrman did not see it that way.

In his rage and aggression, he over-extended a swing.

And then it was over.

Mikael used his smaller blade to knock the scythe upwards while the longer blade separated the First Hunter’s head from his shoulder.

In one smooth motion, Mikael grabbed his opponent’s weapons and threw them, as well as his own, through the open portal.

Emma did not have time to ask what he was doing before she felt IT’s mind.

It was **old**/*young*. It was *normal*/**alien**. **Strong**/*barely there*. *Human*/**other**.

Emma blinked back tears, holding her head as blood dripped from her nose.

ITs mind was alien. *Wrong*. **Familiar**.

The THING was a mass of tentacles and bloody blades. It had limbs in the same way Apocalypse was a mutant. You were technically correct but wrong on so many levels it wasn’t funny.

Emma watched in a haze as the monster/**moon** went to embrace Mikael.

Her summoner/*love*/**everything** tore into it with his claws.

Bladed limbs tore into him as claws carved into IT.

Blood covered the field of white flowers, dying it red.

Emma struggled to stand as she watched the battle of man/*dragon*/**moon** vs. monster/*eldrich being*/**moon**.

Then she blinked, and **Her Everything** was biting IT’s throat out.

IT’s blood flowed down His throat, mixing with Him. IT still lived, though they all knew it would die soon. Consumed.

Mikael/*her dragon*/**her everything** faced her, mouth bloody. His eyes were bloodshot, and he shook with fear as he looked at her. He was bathed in red light.

Emma wanted to cry.

Why?!

Why did he fear her, who would do anything for him, when he could face IT without flinching?

The red light was not the Moon or the Blood.

Six symbols were tattooed in a circle around his heart, visible due to his torn clothing.

“By all six Command Seals, Emma Frost,” Mikael choked on her name. His clawed hand impaled his thigh as he fought to get the following words past his lips.

“Go as deep into my mind as you can and wake me up!”

Then he collapsed, flesh bubbling in a grotesque transformation.

Emma couldn’t watch the horrific process as, compelled by his Command, she entered his now open mind.

For one moment, one instant of pure Insight, she felt both IT’s and His mind and realized they were of the exact same alien nature.

Then the field of flowers was gone, and Emma was basking in overwhelming Love.

She couldn’t remember the first time she connected to Him. Mikael had removed that short-term memory from her. She knew from his memories that she had been hysterical at the time. Emma had dived right back when she discovered her mind had been tampered with.

It was the defining moment of her life.

The Emma of before was a narcissist dedicated to seeing mutant success and her own vain power.

The one reborn in Mikael’s soul, in his Love, was a different person entirely.

Why should she care about the approval of the masses? Why would she need power anymore? She never needed to engage in petty political squabbles or desperate plans again. Mutants could go extinct, and Emma would not care.

Mikael loved her.

If the X-men, Avengers, Fantastic Four, Hellfire Club, the Kree, Skrull, Asgard, and the Pheonix itself all came together to try and hurt her in any way, they would have to face her God.

And Emma would bet on His overwhelming power every. Single. Time.

When Emma had thought of telling the women of the Island she had gone mad, Mikael thought it was a convenient lie.

It wasn’t.

Bathing in Mikael’s Love had been a religious experience.

Emma had been baptized.

Reborn as one of the Chosen.

And now she was back in that all-encompassing embrace.

The White Queen was grateful for Mikael's use of all six command seals.

Without their power urging her ever onward, she would have stayed, basking in the feeling of being where she belonged. Emma would have bathed in that Love for eternity if she could.

She would have failed her God.

Unforgivable!

So, urged deeper and deeper into Mikael's mind, Emma could luxuriate in the feelings surrounding her even as she fulfilled her Sacred Mission.

Eventually, Emma could go no deeper.

She was there, at the core of Mikael's mind. The Heart of the Dragon.

A solid core that rang to her senses of Love/*Freedom*/Rebellion/**Madness**/Acceptance/*Life*.

Perhaps she was love-drunk, but Emma imagined Princess Charming saving the Sleeping Dragon with true love's kiss.

Rather than a kiss, it was a blast of psychic energy. Powered by six command seals, backed a summoner with inexaustable power, even the Phoenix would have flinched at the power Emma released.

It was enough.

The Dream ended.

Emma would not see the great eye, the size of London, open.

She would be too busy watching diamond wings bursting from her back.

******

In history, the small but important details are often overlooked for the flashy events.

People wanted to talk about larger-than-life figures and impressive wars. They did not want to record the minor trade disputes that led to those wars.

Similarly, people would rather talk about fights between supers rather than discuss the socio-economic problems that led to the rise of villains.

The widening economic disparity and lack of accountability led to someone becoming a villain? Who cares! Did you see Superman fight Bizzaro? It was awesome.

It was no surprise that certain things would be lost in the annals of history due to the coming events.

The world changed when the Dragon arrived.

Historians would point to its landing as the turning point in the world's history.

World wars? The advent of Supers? Rise of Mutants? The collapse of nations? If they never happened and the Dragon still landed, things would have progressed similarly.

Those events were all overshadowed.

In academic circles, in the centuries and millennia to come, scholars would debate whether people living at the time had recognized the change.

Some would correctly argue that the population of the early twenty-first century was used to strange and bizarre events.

Alien invasion? It must be Tuesday.

Is the sun blotted out? The Justice League, Avengers, Protectorate, or any number of other hero groups would stop whoever was behind it.

They were jaded. Most people just went about their daily lives, staying away from the Super scene when they could or following their exploits like a tv show. It was amazing what the human mind can get used to.

Other scholars would point out, also correctly, that the Dragon's Descent was not like other events.

While its full ramifications wouldn't be apparent for months, or even years, the immediate effects would be noticeable.

Very few other events lasted so long. Most problems were solved rather quickly by the hero community of the time. No other villain plot led to the creation of a new subcontinent, nor did they spark a war for its resources.

The most definitive evidence the 'immediate changed world' faction would point to would be the sky.

The people of earth would have noticed the change in the sky immediately. Nobody would fail to see the Dark Moon that took up a tenth of the sky. It and the golden rings it contained were symbols of the new world.

While both sides of the debate were right and wrong, they, unfortunately, missed some critical information that was never recorded in the history books.

They were unaware that, a week before the Dragon Descended, a small section of not only the earth but the universe felt reality change.

When the Dragon awoke, freed from its stasis for the first time in millions of years, it sent ripples throughout the universe.

Some on earth could feel it.

******

Within the Sanctum Sanctorum, the Sorcerer Supreme jumped to his feet as he felt the

dimensional walls of reality buckle under the weight of a foreign intruder.

******

Dr. Fate looked skyward, beyond the milky-way, to watch the Lord of Chaos begin his journey. Nabu frowned, not understanding what he was seeing. Was that… Order?

******

In Salem, New York, in a mansion dedicated to human-mutant cooperation, the strongest psychic on the planet, connected to the greatest psionic amplification device, felt a brief tingling in the back of his head. Like someone was talking but too far away to hear. The 'voice' was familiar as well.

Charles Xavier would dismiss the feeling as a psychic bleed-over from the nearby Emma Frost.

******

The earth would not be the only place where the repercussions were felt.

******

The Phoenix would feel the Dragon waking up in its journey through the cosmos.

Its resulting cry of joy would have been beautiful had it not drowned out the burning of nearby planets.

******

The Guardians of Oa would stare at their Lantern in horror as the Emotional Spectrum buckled and shifted. Will was not weakened, nor were the other emotions, but something had irrevocably changed.

******

Upon his throne of skulls, Trigon the Terrible felt his connection to his Daughter strengthen. The archfiend grinned a terrible gin.

Soon.

******

Throughout the universe, anyone who possessed Godhood felt the change. All prophets and readers of Fate felt their prophecies shatter, the future irreparably lost to their eyes.

Any who used mathematical models to predict the future were blessed and cursed. Blessed as their abilities still worked, at least for a little while. Cursed, as they did not realize the shift in reality.

******

While outside forces eyed the dimension hungrily.

While inside forces desperately tried to comprehend how things had changed.

While all this turmoil was rising.

In a small deli, a woman sat and enjoyed her coffee while watching the rain fall.

She smiled a small, private smile as she watched the Dragon gather speed for its journey towards her. At her request.

“Finally.”

Mikael was free.

And she would be too.

Author's Note:

Here we are, the finale of Volume 1.

When I first started writing, I knew I wanted to write a Waifu Catalogue story in a superhero universe. Because I wanted to get better at characterization and thought it would be fun. I didn't want it to be a 'collect them all' story, where the capture of the 'waifus' for points seemed to be the only thing the MC was interested in. That and smut. I wanted it to be engaging to read. Wish fulfillment stories can be as fun as any other, but only if they are actually entertaining and not flat.

Knowing this, I struggled to discover how to convey a sense of identity to not only the supporting cast (the Waifus) and the MC (Mikael). Then I thought about a short story, also a WC fic, that I had written and lost months ago.

If he is going to a superhero world, why not give him an origin story?

Those who've been reading for a while will know I originally referred to Volume 1 as a 'Prologue that never ends'. That is how I think of it. I separate it from the rest of the story in my mind because I want it to be different. Many complain about how 'edgy' and 'dark' this story is. I can understand where they are coming from, even though I knew I had many different plans for the future.

I'm sure this chapter will also have some controversies, but I'll stand by it.

If Melina's death was Mikael's 'Uncle Ben' moment, then letting Emma into his head was his 'Entering the Batcave' moment. Facing his fears to grow.

Mikael would have been a 'loner' if he had been freed before meeting Melina.

He would have been a 'villain' if he had been freed after Melina's death but before learning to trust Emma and the other women.

I did not want either of those outcomes.

For those types of readers who want him to go complete murder hobo, I am sorry to say that isn't the type of man he is. Same for those who want him to go through with his threat of leaving the women of the Island. Not only would that defeat the purpose of writing a WC fic, but it would also invalidate all they went through together. Only by working together did they get free.

It is not all kumbayah, there are still fundamental issues they will need to face, but the origin story ends with this chapter. Friday will be the epilogue, and I have a side story afterwards. Those two will explain not only the entire concept of this fic but also Death's goals and everything we need to know about the Company (at least for this story). That will round out Volume 1.

I'll see you all on Friday.

Ps: For those disappointed we blasted through Bloodborne, I wouldn't worry too much.

Though we were only in Yharnam for one chapter, Bloodborne will have the most significant impact on this story of any world Mikael has been to. Elden Ring comes a close second.

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

But where began the change; and what's my crime?
The wretch condemned, who has not been arraigned,
Chafes at his sentence. Shall I, unsustained,
Drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time?
I must have slept, since now I wake. Prepare,
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:

Not like hard life, of laws. In Love's deep woods,
I dreamt of loyal Life:—the offence is there!
Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled;
At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.
My crime is, that the puppet of a dream,
I plotted to be worthy of the world.
Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
The facts of life, you still had seen me go
With hindward feather and with forward toe,
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!

I remembered as soon as I 'awoke'.

Memories of a three-sided table, a negotiation and a Deal.

Anyone who has ever negotiated a deal before knows; that for any negotiation to succeed, all parties must walk away from the table having achieved their minimum goals. Everything extra was just gravy to maximize their gains. If they didn't meet that baseline, there was no deal.

Death and I, our minimum goal was simple. We wanted me to have the benefits of the Catalogue.

The Company wanted to make an example out of me. They were already making an exception in their policies just talking to me. They did it because Death was a premium client, but they still needed to set a precedent that one couldn't skirt the rules without consequences.

I had believed that so long as I served my sentence and freed myself from it, I would be free of restrictions from the Company.

The Rep had confirmed that was the case.

He had screwed me in two ways.

The first was the obvious trap, the one he never told me about.

He had stated plainly that I would start in Dark Souls 1.

He had not told me I would be in a cell Oscar would not reach.

That one little change might have driven me to hollow.

If I wasn't a tricky bastard, I might have been stuck there, in that cell, for centuries. Even with my precautions, I would have gone mad even if I didn't hollow. I would have waited for an asylum demon or another hollow to find me. That or wait for the metal to rust enough for me to break the door.

It was only due to my desperation after the incident with Emma, combined with seeing Robin use her Devil Fruit, that gave me the idea of stuffing myself, one piece at a time, through the cell door.

He had told me the second trap, knowing I would not understand the implications.

'Your avatars will be puppets. Controllable from the outside.'

It had even been in writing, in the contract I had signed.

I had thought he had meant that my natural body, the Dragon, would puppet the avatars.

I hadn't realized it had been a trap.

If Emma hadn't sprung it early, alerting me to the landmine, I might have screwed myself before I realized it.

My fear of my personality being wiped away wasn't a concern now that I had my main body back. I was still scared, I think I always would be, but it was manageable. It wouldn't paralyze me ever again.

Anyone I ever bound would be able to control any of my avatars. That would remain the fact until I either died or grew more powerful than the Company.

Since I did not control anyone I bound, nor was romance or attraction necessary, I probably would have been very careless with my bite.

I want to heal someone? Bind them!

I want to make someone stronger? Bind them!

Thanks to Death, I would have thought there were no consequences as I could free anyone I bound.

My belief in freedom, not only for myself but for everyone, would be my own shackle. My greatest strength, the reason Death had wanted me in the first place, would become my greatest weakness.

When I realized the problem, I would have dozens of people who had more authority over my Avatar than I. It would be no different than turning myself into a weapon anyone could use. My mind would be safe in my natural body, but I would be limited to being a Dragon the size of a subcontinent.

Powerful but unable to enjoy life.

Thankfully I was a tricky bastard.

Time to Prisoner of Askaban this bitch!

******

My Ascension was nothing like I expected.

In Bloodborne, when one chose to face the Moon Presence in the hidden ending, they usurped their position as Great One. The achievement is called ‘Childhood’s Beginning’. It’s a play on Clarke’s famous book ‘Childhood’s End’, and suggests you leave your body behind to become a being of pure mind. That wasn’t the case; my Avatar was transformed, not left behind, but the principle remained the same.

I had chosen to consume all the umbilical cords, slay the Moon Presence, and ascend as a backup.

If, as I deduced, Emma was able to wake me up by delving deep into my mind and connecting me to the Dragon, then she could have done so as early as her first summoning in the cell.

There was no need to go through all the effort of beating Bloodborne.

I did it anyway for two reasons.

The first, and least of them, was because I could. I had time to kill and liked a few of the characters in the game, so helping to end the Hunt was no extra effort. Slaughtering the beasts was an easy thing for me.

The second, and more significant reason, was that I wanted insurance.

Insurance in case my plan failed.

Insurance in case Emma tried to do something to my mind. I had hoped that if worst comes to worst, she would find a Great One’s mind more challenging to shape.

Though I had, through considerable effort and force of will, brought myself to trust her enough to enter my mind without control once more, my paranoia was still there.

I had also hoped that if I was wrong, my ‘ascension’ beyond mortal minds would allow me to have enough Insight to learn more about the fundamental nature of my imprisonment.

As a newborn Great One, I found my previous worries laughable.

It was all so simple.

I knew what I had to do.

I could feel both of my bodies.

I used one to call upon the other.

I disappeared from the Doll’s arms.

I reappeared, floating in the void of space. I do not know if it was due to my new form or finally being free, but I felt supremely comfortable here.

Like I was wrapped in a warm blanket.

I was in the void between galaxies. Even the closest rogue star was millions of lightyears away.

I, a tiny pale worm, was dwarfed by the massive Demi-plane before me. Shaped like an Island, it hung undefended in the darkness between stars at the edge of an ever-expanding universe.

I could See it all.

I watched my swamps boil and rot.

I watched my drakes fly over my mountains.

I watched my Scourge Beasts tear into a pack of Lightning Rams.

Crystal Lizards burrowed in little dens.

A pair of basilisks were devouring the petrified remnants of a dear.

Familiar animals, environments, and monsters covered my Island, and I could See them all.

I paid all my attention to a mansion at the southern tip of the Island.

I could see them.

Twelve side rooms and a master bedroom. Twelve women. All asleep in bed in those side rooms.

Now that I was free, they would wake soon.

I couldn't have that.

The initial plan was to spend the rest of my 'sentence' with them on the Island once I was freed from my prison. I would be able to contact Death to manipulate the sensation of time passing to whatever ratio I desired. Millions of years would pass outside, and everyone would start to get to know each other over the year or two it would be inside.

The plan had changed in response to the Rep trying to screw me over.

I controlled both my Dragon form and my Avatar.

Both were small for now. One, a pale worm the size of a forearm with tentacles for a head. The other was a white-scaled thing the size of a small mountain that lay upon the Island that dwarfed it in size. It was less than five thousand years old. Both would grow with time, but that was for the future. Right now, I needed to get everything in place.

My body, I moved off the Island as it would grow too large in the coming years.

In the Waifu Catalogue, if you chose the dragon heritage, your Tier was decided by how many points you invested in that option. I had invested enough to get to tier 10, the highest I could. But there were differences even among people of the same Tier. The dragon's body would grow in size and power as it aged. Right now, it was 'young', but I wouldn't fulfill my contract with Death and get my defences till it was 'maxed'.

My Avatar would need to stay on the Island, watching over it and controlling the Dream.

For the irony of it, I created a fake moon projection. It was small compared to Ranni's Dark Moon, which had replaced the real moon, but that one would be hidden until it was time.

Once I was in place, I began to weave the Dream together.

First of all, safety.

Someone would find my Island eventually.

I couldn't allow that to happen.

And the best defence was anonymity.

So, to stack things in my favour, I cheated.

I *moved* myself and the Island. We were there and not there. We were real/fake. We existed/didn't.

It was easy.

As a Great One, time and space did not mean the same to me as they did to others. My Element freed me from all confines. Space-time included.

Should anyone or anything find us here, at the edge of the universe, they would see us but not be able to interact with us. I could not bring us away completely and remain tethered to this dimension, not in my infant state, but someday I would be free of all limits.

For now, it was time to set things in motion.

I encased the Island in a Jewel, the Dream settling over all who lived upon its surface.

A few of the women were too curious for their own good. Things would fall apart if they freed themselves from the Dream before I reached my Tier cap. I would rather not force them to wait for the millions of years it would take me to grow. Unlike me, their minds were not adapted for such a long time.

As it was, I had a long, delicate operation to weave into the Dream.

As mentioned, my Element freed me from bonds. Time and space included. I wasn't at the point where I could casually time-travel but contracting the sensation of time flowing in my Dream or projecting my Dream backwards to myself was easy enough that I could do both at once.

So, I settled into sleep. Until I grew strong enough to defend my freedom from all who would rob it from me.

Soon, the women awoke in the Dream.

I watched them explore the Mansion, unaware that years passed in seconds. I compressed time in the Dream instead of asking Death. In their curiosity and trepidation,

they uncovered every room in the building and the surrounding area. I only protected one place from their investigation.

The master bedroom was completely inaccessible.

That is where I kept my stuff.

Its contents were too precious for any to disturb until we were free.

Eventually, they grew comfortable enough that I sent off Robin to that first fateful meeting in the cell. Power flowed from me to me. The power would alert the 'past me' about their impending arrival. If 'past me' wasn't ready for their survival, my energy would bounce back.

My slight OCD was why I decided to send the power at 3-hour intervals. I also sent a Gate back that only allowed inanimate things to pass through. It wouldn't be needed all the time, but the 'past me' needed to know it was there.

Time progressed.

I watched my journey through all five worlds from the women's perspective.

Once I knew Priscilla was 'bound', I introduced her to the Dream. I felt a bit bad about Ranni, she would remain asleep for millions of years and only wake near the end, but needs must. Until I reached my peak and was free to do as I wished, I would not gain my Defences, Paradox included.

My 'reward' for reaching the point Death needed me at.

I kept things as accurate as I could with timing. Since I didn't feel the universe collapsing into a paradox, I figured I was close enough.

The Dream reflected Life on the Island, but Life also reflected the Dream.

I needn't worry about the women aging, even after millions of years. The Catalogue took care of that. I was concerned about any injuries they might accumulate in the Dream reflecting on their actual bodies, but that could be solved with a simple reset to the bodies they had when they first entered the Dream.

This would also hide the Accumulation of Mystery that the servants gained as they aged. I was sure Medea would notice the change if I didn't hide it. Since there weren't many people on the Island, it wouldn't be fast, but after millions of years, the change would still be noticeable. I was expecting a full rank in all parameters, at least for all three.

I was slightly surprised when their real forms, still asleep, turned into dragons. I guess the Dragon Blood still carried its effects despite the resets.

The Mansion could adapt to their new size, so I just left them as they were. They would be able to turn back when they awoke.

I grew in size and power, as I knew I would.

I was equal in size to the Island after the first million years. After ten million, I was twice its size. By the time my growth slowed to a crawl, as I approached my ‘tier cap’, I was at least five times its size.

Though tens of millions of years passed, I never grew bored. My new nature wasn’t one to be affected by the passage of time. More than that, I was with Them. I saw every part of their lives on the Island that year.

And I Loved them.

It was a mad love.

I had been right about that when I had discovered my emotions were unnatural.

I had been wrong when I thought the feelings were foreign.

I had, understandably, conflated being forced to follow their orders and my feelings of Love.

That was what every other Waifu-catalogue fiction I had read had been about.

Love and Control.

I knew now they came from different sources.

I loved them, not because I was forced to, but from my nature. My nature as a Great One and my nature as a person.

Great Ones were inherently sympathetic to mankind, females especially.

How could I not love them?

They supported me throughout all my worst times and put up with me in the mother of all Emo phases.

They, my new nature told me, would bless me with Children.

But that was for the future, far away.

I laughed when They laughed.

I wept when They wept.

I cheered as They found love and comfort in each other’s arms. As I had said, I wasn’t a jealous man, just possessive. Why should I care if They enjoyed each other’s company?

They were all Mine anyway.

So I enjoyed a nice long vacation, Dreaming of loved ones and happy times.

It wasn’t like no other things of note that happened during my rest.

As I had expected, I was eventually found despite being on the edge of the universe. Indeed, the universe had expanded since I first reached my Island, so I wasn’t at the border, but I was still in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere.

I was ‘asleep’, but so long as I did not move, I wasn’t violating the terms of the Deal. I was free to observe not only my Dream but also the actual space around me.

A handful of times, it was some sort of spaceship.

None were familiar to me, I wasn't an expert on space travel after all, and after they drifted around me for a bit and discovered they couldn't interact with me at all, I sent them away after scrambling their navigation a bit so they never found me again. It was easy enough. No need to kill them, whatever they were, for exploring.

Once or twice, what found me were beings I had no hopes of matching, at least not yet. They, too, investigated me, but my 'distance' from reality kept any threat they posed to a minimum. Eventually, they moved on.

If I were to say what was the most consistently annoying thing to me, it would be that damn bird!

Around the seven million-year mark, I saw a light growing brighter in the distance. At first, I thought a black hole had gone quasar, as occasionally happened, but then it got closer, and I got a good look at it.

It was a massive bird made of fire.

At the time, it had been larger than me, though now I dwarfed it.

The Pheonix, no other way to describe it, had stared at me then. Its head bobbed in avian motion as it evaluated the image that was my tether to reality.

Then it released a beautiful cry as it dived at me.

It passed right through my image.

The image was my anchor. Proof that I was there even as I wasn't there.

It turned and repeated the process with another cry.

It repeated these actions dozens of times.

Finally, it settled down after its tiny bird brain realized that repeating the same actions wouldn't yield different results.

It didn't leave.

I wasn't that lucky.

Instead, it curled into a fireball and parked itself beside me.

It stayed there for a while.

Thousands. Of. Years.

Wrapped up in my Dream, I could do nothing but remain as far away from Real Space as possible.

The bird brain wasn't the problem.

Most of the time, it did nothing except try and poke me with psychic energy. Since I still lacked my Defences, I was forced to defend myself with only my power and desire to remain hidden. Thankfully my will, tempered by all my hardships and now millions of years as a Dragon/Great One, was enough to stave off even the Phoenix's mental probes.

I told it to shoo.

It ignored me and kept trying to probe my mind. I decided to ignore it in return.

The problem was the traces that followed the Phoenix around. I am not surprised people would want to know where the sapient mass of fire was. I still did not like that it attracted their attention to Mine and me.

Eventually, the Phoenix moved on. To do what? I didn't care. Just so long as it left and took its watchers with it.

You can imagine my exasperation when it came back after a hundred thousand years or so.

Until the day I awoke, that damn bird kept visiting me over and over. One day I would turn it into fried chicken, I swear. I'm sure a whole host of civilizations were aware of my existence because of it.

Despite all the visitors, my Dream continued undisturbed until it was time to 'wake up'. Once I saw the women start the ritual, I knew it was time.

I gave a three-day countdown for the women.

Firstly, I inducted Ranni into the Dream. She had been asleep for tens of millions of years, but for her, not even a minute had passed since she was bound.

I allowed her to see my true nature in the moon. It should serve as a suitable warning to others about my changed nature.

I didn't want them to be too shocked.

I was a bit bummed when she assumed a Blood Moon and 'hands on wombs' was normal and didn't ask anyone about it, but, I suppose, I would have to explain to them when they were free.

Then, at noon on the third day, I dissolved the Dream after sending Emma back for one last time.

I awoke.

I was finally free of the terms of service.

I could travel the multiverse as I wished. Despite the problems with my Avatar, no more chains bound my Body. I could feel my Defences take full effect, and a weight lifted from my shoulders. My Avatars would remain puppets, but that was nothing compared to the exultation I felt.

I was finally free.

I could leave this universe behind. Travel at my leisure. Achieve all my dreams.

I seriously considered leaving Death behind. She had to have known the Company Rep would pull something, and she still let me sign that Deal without telling me.

Then her voice reached me.

Had she tried to order me, I would have left this universe behind.

Instead, she politely asked to meet.

And left a ‘congratulatory present’ in my room.

I vacillated for a bit before agreeing to meet.

At the end of the day, she wasn’t the one who had screwed me over. Instead, it was only at her insistence that I was here, achieving my dream.

And that gift went a long way to making up for all the hardship.

I let out a ‘whoop’ of joy as I did a barrel roll. I was gathering some serious speed, my Element freeing me from silly limits like ‘lightspeed’. I would have to be careful not to crash into any planets along the way.

The Island, safely encased in the Jewel, was held in my claws.

I could See the inhabitants waking up from the Dream. They were trying to get their bearings, and a few had even returned to human form. I would have to talk to them and clear the air once we landed.

As I imagined that conversation, I realized a slight issue.

I had given up my human body when I ascended. My Avatar was that of a Great One. I wasn’t in my infancy anymore, but I was still young by Eldritch Horror standards. I couldn’t shapeshift at will.

Not a problem.

I had a few days to reach earth. Plenty of time to figure it out.

So I asked myself the question every Great One asks themselves once in their lives.

How does one Human?

******

“Before we begin, I want to thank you all for coming.” Clark couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face as he looked out on the gathering of heroes. Despite the Justice League’s youth, many heroes had responded to their call. “Though we belong to different teams and have had our differences in the past, I am happy to see so many have responded to our call for aid. I am sorry it is happening in such circumstances. Let us meet under better circumstances in the future.”

There was a smattering of applause, mostly from his fellow league members, but everyone seemed to respond positively. Even those who were present remotely, watching from projectors or other means of communication.

The gathering wasn’t that large. Most heroes were not able to operate in the vacuum of space or lacked the firepower to be of aid in the coming fight. Eidolon, Iron Man, Martian Manhunter, Wonder Woman, Shazam, Thor, Dragon, Supergirl, Captain Marvel,

and Green Lantern. Half were part of the League, a natural result when they dealt with most off-world problems. Other heroes were present, but that handful were the only ones who could be part of this operation.

To the side, there was also a representative of the UN.

This could concern every nation, should they fail. Clark was sure half of those present were recording this whole conference.

“I know we are all busy, so I will let the experts speak.”

Superman flew down from the podium, taking his seat near the front. Though he already knew everything that would be presented, it wouldn’t be wrong to make sure to double-check.

He also kept an ear out for the murmuring of the heroes present in the room. There was an air of unease. More often than not, the Justice League did not call for aid from other organizations or heroes. It wasn’t a full-on rivalry, but there was a disconnect between those government-approved heroes, like the PRT and the UN-backed League. Most team-ups were spontaneous in nature.

“Six days ago, the magic community felt a disturbance.” Dr. Fate began. He spoke matter-of-fact, leaving no room for questions or discussion. Clark wished the Lord of Order had a bit more tact. Many of the other heroes were already frowning. Magic was not only a Kryptonian weakness but a problem for many superpowers.

A holographic image appeared behind Fate. In hiding in the shadows, Batman was operating the presentation machine.

“Dragon!” Thor jumped to his feet, fist pumping in excitement. “I have not had the chance to face such a beast. What a glorious day, my friends!”

The image caught the white dragon as it flew through a field of black. Light shone from the jewel it carried, illuminating its form in the darkness of space.

It was similar to the western style of dragons that Clark was familiar with. Four clawed limbs, a long neck, a reptilian tail, and wings. All were covered in white scales. That is where the similarities ended. Rather than one pair of wings, the being had three pairs. It was lithe, skinnier than Clark expected, almost avian in shape.

Superman rubbed his eyes. Looking at the thing always gave him a headache for some reason. Maybe it was how the light hit its spikes? Sometimes it looked like fur, wings, or tentacles. Like an optical illusion.

Others groaned, like Eidolon, his cousin, and Captain Marvel. They held their heads, turning from the image. Others like J’ohn, Dragon, and Shazam continued to study the image without issue.

“This is a Lord of Chaos.” Dr. Fate continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted by the

Asgardian. “Its existence alone is a threat to our survival.”

The room quieted once more at his words, and Thor retook his seat. The large man looked severe as he did. He knew how dangerous these beings could be. Others weren’t so well informed.

“How?” Eidolon asked.

“Lords of Chaos are higher beings of great mystical power. They represent change and anarchy. They act to disrupt anything stable and spread chaos with everything they do.” Only his experience with Kent Nelson allowed Clark to notice the worry in the Lord of Order’s tone. “This one is the worst ever discovered.”

“Why?” Captain Marvel asked. As people looked at her, she elaborated. “Why is this one the worst? What makes it special?”

“Because it is fully manifested.” Dr. Fate answered. “As higher beings, Lords of Order or Chaos cannot enter this reality as they please. They either act through intermediaries or use avatars tethered to our plane. Once I sensed its power, I consulted the Sorcerer Supreme about its incursion into this realm. It did not break down the dimensional walls. It has always been here, and we did not know.”

“Where is Dr. Strange?” Dragon asked. “He should be here as well.

“He is currently focusing on repelling outer dimensional excursions,” Dr. Fate answered. “The walls protecting our realm are unstable. The Lord of Chaos is likely the cause. The Sorcerer Supreme has been engaged in reinforcing them since it manifested and will likely not be able to aid us in battling it.”

“There is another problem,” Hal spoke up as he stood and turned to the rest of the room. “The image you are looking at was captured by a Green Lantern four days ago. He saw it travelling by chance in his sector. Without a cause to stop it, he decided to alert all other Lanterns in its path.”

Green light filled the room as a 3D image of the universe was projected for everyone. A glowing X marked a spot on the map, far from away from any galaxy. From the X, a dotted line crossed the remaining distance. Anyone familiar with star charts would recognize the one galaxy that it intersected.

The milky way.

“It might turn in another direction, but if it doesn’t, it will pass through the solar system.” His piece said that the Green Lantern disabled the projection and sat back down.

“So what?” Clark almost groaned as he heard his cousin speak. She was still relatively new to the League, and if it wasn’t for the dearth of space-capable fighters, he would have argued for her exclusion from the meeting. “It shows up here? We kick its scaly ass.”

“Well said!”

That is just what he needed.

Kara getting positive reinforcement from the Viking god of thunder.

“We cannot allow the Lord of Chaos near the earth.” Dr. Fate said with finality. “Not just because of its power. I cannot estimate its depth from so far away. The real problem is its size.”

On the projector, the image of a human silhouette replaced the dragon. Then the image zoomed out, the human shrinking in profile as it stood beside a recognizable building.

“This is the Empire State building.” The image zoomed out again. A mountain dwarfed the building.

“Mt. Everest.” Zoom out. The mountain shrunk to a tiny hill.

“The asteroid that destroyed the dinosaurs.” Out again. This time it was a landmass.

“Iceland.” For one final time, the image zoomed out. The human, building, and mountain were invisible. The asteroid was a spec. Iceland was maybe a sixth of the size of the dragon.

Tony Stark whistled. “Big one, ain’t it?”

“Should the dragon reach earth,” Hal explained. “Its size alone could wipe life from the planet’s surface. Every movement would cause natural disasters. Hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, and earthquakes from its steps. That is, if it lands. If it keeps flying at its current speed, it will smash through any world that gets in its way. Only due to the Lantern’s rings’ super-lightspeed capabilities were we able to get a picture. It has crossed half the universe in three days.”

“What’s the plan?” Wonder Woman, silent until now, asked. She had returned from Themyscira yesterday and was only now being briefed on the situation.

“We will meet it beyond Mars in two days. I will provide transportation for those who need it.” Dr. Fate said. “I will also provide records of known Lords of Chaos. Their powers and habits. I recommend preparing as much as possible. Alert your teams. They must be prepared if the worst happens and we fail. If that happens, it would be an apocalypse.”

“We won’t fail,” Superman said as he took the podium from Fate. “We are not trying to kill this thing. With any luck, we needn’t fight it at all. It could be passing through, or we could talk to it.” Clark saw Fate grimace at the idea, but the Kryptonian would be happy if this could be settled with words rather than fists. “If it comes to a fight and we manage to banish it, great. But our goal is to divert it. It must not reach earth.”

Everyone looked serious, understanding what was at stake. Some got up to leave, but a question stopped them.

“What’s up with the jewel?” Kara asked, still looking at the picture. “It’s pretty. Is it

because it is a dragon and needs a treasure to guard or something?" Everyone else looked to Clark or Fate.

"We do not know," Hal answered instead. "The Lantern who took the picture could not get any readings on the creature or what it was holding. It could be something magical. Components for something. It could be a power source. It could be a vanity item. Maybe it just likes how it looks."

"It is possibly its tether to this reality," Dr. Fate picked up. "Most Lords of Chaos are anchored to this universe through a tether. Klarion's cat, for example. This Lord's ability to fully manifest is possibly due to the jewel acting as a powerful tether. Destroying it might banish it. Or it might attract its vengeance upon the earth. I would only recommend it as a last resort."

On that dreary note, the meeting broke up. Most left, returning to their teams to alert them of the possible calamity.

******

Batman watched his monitors from within Mt. Justice.

The group floated in space, far enough away that mars was barely perceivable in the distance. They were ready for the showdown, and Clark was prepared to intercept. He, and Hal, would be the two primarily responsible for slowing the dragon down enough for the others to take their shots.

Their projections placed its arrival in the solar system in fifteen minutes. It would arrive at Mars thirty seconds after.

Batman knew his most significant contribution to the coming battle would be his mind and outside perspective, but it was hard not to feel frustrated.

This might be the end of the world, and he was stuck on the ground.

The Bat looked to one of the monitors, the only one not showing the gathering of heroes in space.

In it, floating just outside the earth's atmosphere, was the Simurgh.

It was the reason for his grounding. This Endbringer, the newest on the scene, had ensured that any space-capable vehicles were destroyed before getting off the ground.

Most wouldn't have noticed.

But Bruce Wayne was not most people.

He had noticed right away.

Ever since its appearance a year and a half ago, all further missions into space exploration have faced setbacks. It was subtle budget cuts, engine failures, and other

minor points of failure that, on their own, looked like sad coincidences. Older machines able to travel to space, such as a few of Iron Man's suits or the Fantastic Four's ship, also managed to get destroyed with enough regularity that something was apparent.

To Batman? Who had access to a wide net of information?

It was clearly sabotaged.

While Ziz did not take action against those who could breach the earth's atmosphere using their abilities, any type of manned craft was doomed to failure.

Iron Man and Dragon got around this restriction using drones, but Bruce had to scrap many projects due to the newest Endbringer presence.

Included was a plan for a much more secure base for the League.

Right now, the biggest problem with facing the titanic monsters was the sheer lack of knowledge people had about them. They had shown up five years ago and started wreaking havoc. They only attacked once every three months and had been repelled each time, but how to kill them permanently was unknown.

The only thing everyone was sure about was that they were intent on destroying the most prosperous human settlements.

Not for the first time, Batman cursed his limited knowledge of magic. Mystical powers seemed to possess the most significant advantage against the enormous beasts, particularly Simurgh.

Turning from watching the source of his frustration, Bruce refocused on the current mission. There would be time to continue his study of the Endbringers later.

Provided they survived the day.

Everyone on the mission had at least three cameras, transmitting to Mt. Justice through miniature quantum tunnels. There was no delay in the information relay. Bruce knew the heroes' respective governments/organizations were also watching their feed. Usually, Batman preferred to keep information as close to his chest as possible, but he didn't argue this time. It would be better if more people were prepared in case of failure.

Five minutes to projected arrival.

Bruce was going through the info on Lords of Chaos for the sixtieth time while watching the monitors when a splash of blue, out of place in the darkness of space, caught his eyes. It was gone in an instant, but Bruce cycled through the monitors to see if it appeared again.

He was the first to notice the new arrival because he was looking for something strange. He rushed to get the words out, making sure to speak clearly, while pressing the button that would transmit his voice to the fighters.

"Wonder Woman! Behind you!"

******

The amazon whirled, sword flashing to block a blow that wasn't there.

What was there was a woman.

She was short, only a little over five feet tall. She wore a conservative white dress, covered by a feathered cloak, and a massive stereotypical witches hat sat atop her head.

Had that been all, Diana would have thought her a human woman in a costume. But other aspects stood out more.

Her blue skin and four arms clearly demarked her as an alien. More than that, what skin that showed was cracked. Like shattered porcelain.

"Curious," the blue woman said. She stood not even twenty feet from Diana in the void of dark space. Her piercing blue eyes evaluated the amazon, memorizing every feature and looking further. Deeper. "Thy art identical, though considerably weaker. Thy also lack our Lord's blessings. Twins, perchance?"

"Who are you?" Wonder Woman asked as the rest of the group moved to surround the woman.

'I cannot sense her mind', J'ohn communicated to the group telepathically.

If being surrounded bothered the four-armed alien, she did not show it. She did not even look at the others, staring at Wonder Woman.

"I am Ranni, Goddess of the Chill Moon." She said the words simply. Not bragging but stating a fact.

"And I am Thor, God of Thunder!" Ranni did not look at the Asgardian as he introduced himself bombastically.

"Bit small for a goddess," Tony said, his voice coming from the speaker on one of his three drones. The self-proclaimed goddess did not react to the man's words, so he continued. "Like a big blueberry, really."

The fact that they could hear each other in space, where no sound should travel, meant that something was going on that the heroes weren't seeing. They had been communicating through telepathy or, in the case of the drones, messages to the insulated earpieces everyone carried that kept them in contact with Batman and Earth.

"She is a Lord of Order," Dr. Fate said, silencing Iron Man's following comment. The sorcerer was one of the least inconvenienced by their current location, protected by his magics. "Look up. We are already in her domain."

Indeed, above them, providing a pale blue light, was a moon like none Diana had ever seen.

It was like someone had taken earth's moon, blown it up to five times its size, and then hollowed the inside using a black hole. Snowflake-like particles floated into the center. In that dark void, Golden lines and rings glowed. They formed a complicated pattern that Diana did not recognize.

"What the fuck?" Supergirl asked in shock. "When did that get there?"

"More importantly," Eidolon had not taken his eyes off Ranni. "Why are you here, and what do you want?"

"Are you here for the Lord of Chaos as well?" Clark asked. It was possible. Opposing Lords were like oil and water. If Dr. Fate was correct about the dragon being a fully manifested Lord of Chaos, it would attract almost every follower of Order in the universe.

For the first time since her arrival, the blue woman turned her attention from the amazon to look at the Kryptonian.

"I know not of what this Lord of Chaos is. Perhaps the Three Fingers have reached here with their burning touch?" The goddess took a moment to look around her, eyeing the gathered heroes for the first time. "Tis irrelevant if such is the case. My Lord Husband would not tolerate their existence. I am here as his Guiding Moonlight, illuminating his journey through the great beyond. The others remain with him, acclimating to their new states. I ask of thee; Why hath thee gathered here? What is thine intent?"

"We're just trying to protect our home planet," Shazam said, smiling down at the woman.

"A fine goal, though; why are thee here? In this place?"

'Keep her talking', Bruce piped up in their earpieces. 'Something's not right here. Why is a Lord of Order showing up now, where we set up? The more we know, the better. Hal, keep watch for the dragon and alert us when it reaches the outer rim.'

"Whose your husband?" Captain Marvel asked instead of answering. The 'goddess's' face remained blank and expressionless even as she tilted her head at the question. The way the blue woman moved set Diana's teeth on edge. It was so deliberate. Unnatural. Like a puppet being marionetted around. "You're here to guide him, right? He must be nearby."

"I do not guide him," Ranni corrected. "I merely illuminate the path on which he had decided to tread. No person or force may compel him to follow a course he has not chosen. Such is his nature."

"Who is he?" Captain Marvel repeated the question.

"My Lord Husband is Elden Lord." She said the words like they were all they needed to know. Space was empty. Water was wet. Her husband was Elden Lord.

Whatever that was.

“Not telling us much, Blueberry,” Tony said sarcastically. Ranni stared at the man.

“What my friend means,” Clark interjected before things escalated. “Is that we are not familiar with the term. What is an Elden Lord? Is it similar to a Lord of Order like you? He’s on his way, right? We could use some help against a Lord of Chaos that should be arriving soon.”

“This is one of thine ‘Lords of Order’?” The goddess was looking at Dr. Fate with intensity. “I see but the barest fragment in the body of a man. I sense nothing of thine Order. Is this ‘Lord of Chaos’ of the same ilk? My Lord Husband would aid you, should you request it of him. Though he would free the man who you control in the process. He loathes those who puppet others. Should thy attract his intention, he might slay you instead.”

“The man is lending his body to Dr. Fate willingly,” Shazam said, also trying to keep things civil. “We don’t know if the enemy is possessing a body or not.”

“Petition for his aid. Though he is a stubborn and tyrannical man, he is not without his mercies. More so that one of thine party would be of interest to him.” The small woman was staring at Wonder Woman again. Her words drew a question from the amazon, hands tightening on her sword.

“Tyrannical?”

“Indeed. My Lord is the worst sort of tyrant. He follows but his own whims, disregarding all that is conventional or sacred. He laughs at cardinal sins and blasphemy. Should thee receive his favour, then nothing will bar your way. Should his whim fall against thee, or should thee attract his ire, nothing would stay you from his judgement.”

‘Doesn’t sound like a Lord of Order to me’, Kara said sarcastically, her mental voice transmitted to the group.

“You never answered the question.” Dragon, her only drone silent till now, pointed out. “What is an Elden Lord? What does it mean?”

“He is Elden Lord by virtue of might.” Diana tried to place what was bothering her about Ranni. Her face did not emote, nor was her voice inflected with any emotion. Something was bugging the amazon, though, something familiar. “He arrived in the Lands Between with no arms nor armour. Unclothed and unaided. With his skill and mind, he slew all who stood between him and the Throne.” The group of heroes tensed.

“Armies and countries stood before him, and he remained undaunted.” Far from being concerned with their rising tension, the blue woman continued to talk. “He brought Destined Death to the land. Omen King Morgott. Starscourge Radahn. Malenia the Undefeated. Demigods all! He slew them, claiming their power and Great Runes for himself. Even previous Elden Lords, Radagon of the Golden Order, Godfrey, and

Dragonlord Placidusax fell to his blade. When the Greater Will itself tried to oppose my Lord Husband, he cleansed it in an unending tide of fire and lightning!"

It suddenly dawned on Diana what was familiar about Ranni.

Though her voice was monotone and expressionless, she talked like one of those women who bragged about their family. Whose husband was the CEO of this company or whose child was the next Reed Richards.

It didn't make her words any less terrible.

"So your hubby is something of a conqueror?" Though Iron Man tried to sound relaxed, everyone could hear the grim undertones of his voice.

"Indeed." Diana could almost imagine the small woman puffing up with pride. "Including my own, five worlds have already fallen to him. Their gods tried to put up a resistance, but he slew them too. It mattered not whether they be deities, demons, or dragons. All who opposed him were laid low. I act now as his Guiding Moonlight, so I may illuminate his path towards wheresoever his journey takes him. Should thee wish to meet him and petition his aid, my Lord Husband will be here momentarily."

"He sounds like a fine warrior!" Thor said, grinning. "I should be glad to meet him." A part of Diana could understand where Thor was coming from. The part of her that respected strength and enjoyed a good spar. The 'conquered worlds' part sounded too like a villain for the rest of her to get on board with that part of her.

'The dragon just passed the Oort Cloud!' Hal said in their mental communication line. His ring was the only thing with enough range and power to sense that far away. 'It's going slower than projected and slowing down. We have two minutes till contact!'

"He wouldn't happen to be a white dragon? A country or two in size?" Captain Marvel asked the question on a few of their minds.

"That is his current form, yes." The large hat bobbed as the small woman nodded.

Thor's grin fell.

Diana readied her sword.

Others armed themselves and prepared for a confrontation.

The worst reaction was Dr. Fate.

"A Lord of Order serving a Lord of Chaos? Impossible!" He exclaimed. For the first time ever, Diana heard the mage sound unnerved.

"I see," Ranni glowed blue, a shimmering field around her. "Thou seek to impede his path. I shall not allow such a thing. I shall caution thee. A few others have attempted to halt his progress. None remain. Cease this foolishness, beg for his mercy, and he might grant it. Fail to do so, and I shall slay all but this woman. She will be brought to the Island. I imagine Medea would like to study her nature or one of the others interrogate

her. Perhaps my Lord Husband would bless thee or take thee as another consort, should thee prove amenable. He is a letch like that."

Diana readied her blade, even as others placed themselves between her and the 'goddess'. Medea? Wonder Woman had never met the infamous witch, hadn't even known she still lived, but if she was anything like her aunt Circe, then it would not be a meeting she enjoyed. Also, 'another consort'? The sad part was that Diana wasn't even surprised that a Lord of Chaos was a rapist and kidnapper.

"We're just trying to protect our home," Shazam repeated his earlier words, trying to forestall the conflict. "If your husband would just go around and leave us alone, we don't have a problem. Easy right? We don't need to fight if Lords of Chaos and Order can even be married."

"Fight?" Ranni looked at the man blankly. "This is no fight. Should thee attempt to stop my Lord Husband with such insignificant strength, he would swat thee as flies. I merely save him the bother. Thy mistake has been evaluating us upon thine own scale. Thine 'order'," the woman goddess gestured at the agog Dr. Fate, "is but a pale imitation of mine own." Her hands, glowing blue with power, were lifted to the chill moon, inlaid with golden rings. "That thee would claim his Freedom is mere Chaos, is perhaps the greatest of offences."

Then everything exploded into pale ice.

******

The fight began as a burst of pale ice exploded with enough force to kill anyone here, like an iceberg hit by a missile. They had been prepared, so no one was seriously hurt, dashing away from the blast. It did break up the formation surrounding the woman giving their enemy time to cast their following spells.

Where once was one small blue alien now stood a few dozen. All were glowing with power.

The red light of Superman's eye beams tore through half of them. The energy did not hit them but passed through.

'Illusions!' The Kryptonian said over the mental link.

A few more were destroyed by the concentrated fire of Stark's or Dragon's weapons.

Then everyone staggered forward as their backs exploded in pain. The two Kryptonians, weak to magic, cried out in pain. Diana, Shazam and Thor were magically resistant, and Dr. Fate, Green Lantern and Eidolon had shields protecting them. Captain Marvel was lucky enough to have dodged the blow from behind.

The drones were torn apart, shrapnel flying as dark blue darts blasted through their backs and chests.

Shazam, Diana and Thor flew forward, intent on closing the distance. Eidolon blasted an energy beam of his own, covering their approach. He was limited to only one power at a time for the fight. The other two slots were dedicated to keeping him alive and maneuverable in the void of space.

Diana and Shazam slashed at one of the illusions each, passing through.

Thor's blow, his hammer clad in lightning, was met with a long sword made of magic.

'The true one!' The god of thunder exclaimed as he tried to blast the small blue woman. He looked like he would overpower the goddess, Mjolnir bearing down and cracking the magic blade.

'No!' Dr. Fate exclaimed.

Behind the Asgardian, another blue blade appeared, ice wafting off it. It swung, cutting through the man's back. Only due to his magic-resistant nature and his armour was his life spared. Still, a bloody line tore through the man, not deep, but the wound froze, preventing it from healing.

Another Ranni appeared, holding the handle of the magic blade. She swung again, intent on killing the blond god, but Diana managed to block the blade with her own sword.

'Some illusions are real', the Lord of Order explained, even as he exchanged magic with another Ranni. 'They are mixed in with the fakes, and some are invisible'.

Diana overpowered the woman, her sword shattering the magic and cutting her head from her body.

Instead of blood or flesh, the amazon saw a main frame in the neck, wrapped by tightly corded wires and covered in pale porcelain.

"Futile," the decapitated head said. It stared at Diana, face impassive even as it floated away. "I have supplanted Queen Marika the Eternal. My Lord bequeathed me the Elden Ring on the day we were wed. His consorts have released the shackles of my soul. No matter how many of my dolls you destroy, you shall all fall before our combined might."

The amazon watched Shazam punch another doll to pieces, even as Hal crushed another between two plates of green energy. Dr. Fate weaved fire into a snake, lashing out and burning two more. Eidolon, discarding his blaster power, formed a wall of force. It protected the Martian Manhunter from a rain of dark blue crystals.

In the distance, Superman and Supergirl crashed into one another, purple lighting covering their forms. They had been manhandled this entire fight in one form or another. Never able to properly take advantage of their speed. A Ranni doll gathered magic in her

hands, forming an enormous bow. Dozens of arrows glittered with power, ready to blow the Kryptonians.

The spell fizzled into nothing a Captain Marvel flew through the doll with a roar.

Thor, still wounded, released an enormous blast of magical lighting, dissolving dozens of illusionary dolls. An invisible Ranni appeared behind him, magic blasting forward to finish the Asgardian off. The hero had learned from the previous bout and dodged to the side, Mjolnir destroying the doll with his movement.

“I believe I shall use Medea’s suggestion to name this semblance; Diorama,” the floating head said conversationally to Diana. Its voice was still monotone, uncaring for the fight. “It captures the essence. More elegant than the cat’s ‘Doll House’.”

Diana smashed the head to pieces as she flew to engage another Ranni.

The endless tide of Ranni dolls fought the gathering of heroes. Tens were destroyed but even more replaced them. Ranni did not seem bothered to cast large spells, focusing more on targeted attacks. They still took wounds.

Eidolon fell to a Rain of Stars. He survived but was stuck using his third slot to heal.

Green Lantern was taken unawares by a handful of glinting daggers. He protected his head and torso, but his limbs were punctured.

The two Kryptonians, bound by purple gravitational power to each other, had been flash frozen by a mist of ice.

Others were sporting bruises and a few lacerations from either magical blades or masses of crystals.

‘It’s past the Oort Cloud!’ Hal’s voice rang in their earpiece. ‘It’s going slower than before. We have twenty seconds!’

‘She’s distracting you’, Bruce’s voice was calm, even in the face of calamity. ‘We can’t intercept as we are. Diana, free Superman. The rest; block’.

Wonder Woman wasted no time following the instruction. She had taken the least damage, likely due to Ranni’s desire to preserve her.

She smashed the iceberg apart in a few seconds, freeing the Kryptonians. Though they were weak to magic, they hadn’t been hurt enough to actually disable them. Kara looked pissed. Clark looked serious as he turned from the fight, ready to fly and try and intercept the dragon.

Ranni appeared in front of him.

“I cannot allow thee thy freedoms,” she said, her voice steady. “I hath tried to show you the errors of thy ways. No more! Perish for my Lord!”

She floated into the air, curling into a ball as she glowed in the familiar dark blue light representing her Order.

The power that welled up in that five-foot image was enough that even the most magically inept of those gathered could feel it.

'Stop her!' Dr. Fate cried in a panic.

With the Wisdom of Solomon, Billy Baston knew what he needed to do.

The Dark Moon fell.

"Shazam!"

Divine lightning tore through space, seeking the boy turned man.

It detonated the spell before it had time to escape Ranni's hands, reducing her doll to ashes.

The blast was apocalyptic.

Reduced by being ruptured too early and its encounter with lighting, it would have been enough to kill many defenders and severely injure the rest.

But something Strange happened.

'Sorry I'm late', the Sorcerer Supreme communicated as he appeared within the group of heroes. 'I managed to displace everyone at the last moment. That's all I can do. That spell was Anti-Magic. I am having trouble keeping myself protected'.

'You did enough', Clark responded. 'Can the rest of you keep her busy?'

'We have her', Diana responded. 'Be careful. If she is this strong, her husband will be worse'.

'I know', Superman said with grim finality. 'I won't give him any chances'.

Barely had the blast passed did the Hero of Tomorrow take off into the distance of space.

He didn't need to go far.

The rest of the heroes remained to fight the Goddess of the Chill Moon, but even they could see the white dot grow as it approached. Those with better eyes could see more details. Gleaming white scales. Six wings. An enormous Jewel, glittering with all colours imaginable.

An eye blink later, the dot was the size of a head.

Blink. The head had become a house.

Blink. The house became a mountain.

Superman met that mountain.

He flew at top speed, fist extended. He did not have access to the Speed Force but damned if he didn't try and match the Flash at that moment.

He aimed for the Jewel, ready to carve through it and, hopefully, the dragon beyond.

His fist met that glittering light.

The dragon, flying faster than light, met Superman's top speed.

And nothing happened.

The Kryptonian flew through the Jewel, then the dragon itself.

‘Another illus-’ Clark thought to the group.

The dragon was suddenly there, flying by the heroes throwing themselves at Ranni’s dolls.

Diana saw it all in an instant.

Between one heartbeat and the next, she caught the full Majesty of the Dragon. Far enough away that she could see its whole being in all its Glory.

Its great eye, more enormous than cities, saw the gathering of heroes.

Saw her.

In that one frozen moment, Diana could feel its attention. Feel the millions of years, the eldritch mind and the abyss of power evaluating them.

Judging them.

It found them wanting.

But it did not smite them.

Just as Diana knew her own name, she knew the Dragon could have killed them at that moment but chose not to.

Then the moment was over.

The Dragon was flying away.

‘-ion’, Clark’s message finished.

‘It’s not an illusion!’ Stephen Strange denied the Kryptonian’s words. ‘It’s dimensionally shifted. It can be as solid as it wants to be! Everyone, to me! Fate, I’ll need your help for the power’.

Wasting no time and not giving up, the group gathered around the magicians as they channelled power to open a portal.

Ranni watched them, no longer trying to stop them.

“Rejoice! My Lord has chosen to spare thee,” she said simply. Her bodies were vanishing into motes of light. The symbol of her Order, the Dark Moon inlaid with Golden Rings, disappeared. “Heed this warning, mortals. My Lord Husband is merciful. His consorts and I are not. We will tolerate no more actions taken against him. He has suffered enough.”

With those ominous words, Ranni vanished.

The heroes could not respond as they were also whisked away by a magic portal.

******

They reappeared above the earth. They were well outside the range of the atmosphere and were floating somewhere over the pacific ocean.

The moon was visible, far into the distance and to the side.

'Three seconds', Hal reported.

'Strange, and I will lock it down', the Lord of Order said quickly. 'Hit it with everything'.

'It shall taste my hammer!' Thor answered.

Then the dragon was visible once more in the distance.

It was going much slower, well below the speed of light. It still filled their sight, but they could at least respond.

Even before the magicians had cast their spell, Eidolon was the first to fire, still bleeding from partially healed wounds. A bar of energy, a meter wide, flew from his hands. It pulsed and throbbed in strange ways, colours shifting oddly. It flew for kilometres, rushing to meet the oncoming dragon.

And the dragon… dodged!

The Lord of Chaos changed its flight plan for the first time since it had been discovered. It shifted to the right, angling itself eastward.

'Again', Batman urged the man.

Eidolon was already on it.

He flew after the dragon, trying to compensate for its new trajectory.

His blasts missed, falling behind the beast's speed.

'Hit it if you can', Superman said, flying out to try and intercept once more. He was followed by the rest. 'If not, try and steer it at an angle away from the earth's atmosphere'.

Strange and Fate teleported above the US, the angle the dragon turned setting on passing through the Northwestern hemisphere. They gathered their magic, casting a complicated ritual together to anchor the Lord of Chaos to this realm and make it vulnerable.

For thirty seconds, any residents of the pacific islands could look up at the night sky and see a white dragon flying in the distance, a massive Jewel in its hand. It was pursued by pinpricks of light, lashing out with beams at its enormous form.

Had this been five centuries ago, a new religion might have started then and there.

Since this was the twenty-first century, the video was uploaded to the internet almost instantly.

Nor were pacific islanders the only ones who saw the sight.

The dragon was high enough and large that anyone between 0 and 40 degrees north of the equator, between Hawaii and Venezuala, saw at least part of the Dragon's flight.

Its image would have been practically invisible in the day sky if the sun had been up.

Since it was night, the glittering jewel and its protector were plainly visible against the black backdrop.

'Now!'

Two things happened almost simultaneously.

First, magic fountained from two of the most powerful mages in the world. It reached out and enveloped the titanic Lord of Chaos.

The Dragon's wing beats stuttered slightly.

Second, Eidolon fired his most significant attack yet. Tens of meters wide, the multidimensional power tore through the night sky.

The blast hit!

And, like Superman before, passed right through.

'What!' Eidolon exclaimed in shock and fury.

'No!' Many heroes cried out in fear as they realized the Dragon was not only not vulnerable, but it did not fear Eidolon's power in the least.

'If it wouldn't be hit anyway, why did it change course?' Supergirl asked.

'What's in that direction?' J'ohn asked.

'It's too far south to hit Washington or New York without changing its flight path again'. Hal responded.

'Britain', Clark said with realization. 'It will pass over London!'

'That's not its target!' Batman exclaimed in their ears. 'It's heading for the Simurgh!'

******

Enough people and organizations dedicated observations to the Simurgh, the easiest Endbringer to track, that the video of what happened next would be all over the world within an hour.

A gargantuan dragon, so giant as to eclipse the sky in most feeds, descended upon the multi-winged woman. Its jaw opened wide enough to swallow smaller countries. Its teeth were in no way inferior in size to the Himalayas.

Despite its purported omniscient clairvoyance, Ziz took no action to defend itself.

It was like it could not even sense or notice its demise approaching.

White fangs closed around the Endbringer as the Dragon swallowed it in a single, mighty gulp.

Having consumed the winged woman, the Dragon turned into a dive.

The heroes watched, helpless to do anything as the Lord of Chaos breached the

atmosphere.

They had failed.

Their worst fears were not realized.

The Dragon did not crash through the earth's crust in a destructive collision.

It did not ignite upon entry, despite its considerable speed and size.

When its titanic body met the ocean, it kicked up no tsunamis or hurricanes.

For a moment, many dared to hope that this being, this Elden Lord, would pass through the earth as it had their attacks.

Leaving it behind, unspoiled.

Their hopes were not realized either.

******

People in the western hemisphere awoke to a changed world.

The disappearance of the Simurgh was the least of the changes.

Some noticed immediately, especially those who awoke before sunrise or never went to bed.

Others went about their day for hours without noticing.

But eventually, everyone knew something irreversible had happened.

A Dark Moon, inlaid with Golden Rings, hung in the sky.

No matter your place on the planet.

No matter the time of day.

No matter the weather.

When you looked up, you saw that symbol.

Distant yet ever-present.

Another change happened.

Less noticeable, perhaps, to most who called earth home.

But this was the most crucial change for those who knew the truth.

South of St. Johns.

East of cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Washington.

North by northeast of Bermuda.

In international waters.

An Island had appeared.

Shaped like a vertical eye, south to north, it was a third the size of the British Isles.

Surrounding the new landmass was a chain of white mountains jutting up from the sea in a circle.

At its southern tip, an observant flyer might have noticed the oddly triangular shape of the largest mountains and how, if you squinted and tilted your head, it might look like a dragon's head.

The ramifications of the presence of the Dark Moon and the Island would be felt for centuries.

For the inhabitants of this new landmass, the consequences of their presence did not matter in the least.

Something far more important was happening.

******

I formed my body in front of the glass doors of the Mansion.

I was small, barely three feet tall.

Nothing I can do about that for now. I was still pretty young by Great One standards.

I was also only vaguely humanoid.

Too many tentacles, too few features.

My reflection in the glass door showed a pale white, squidlike child. I had done my best to look a little less horrific and a little cuter.

I hoped to have a new body soon, but that could wait.

I needed to do this first.

A tentacle curled around the door's handle, opening inward.

I would have time to admire the beautiful furnishings, tasteful decorations, and luxurious furniture later.

I rushed through the lobby and up the stairs as fast as my stubby tentacles could carry me. I tripped a few times, but it didn't hurt.

"My Lord!" I heard Ranni exclaim. I have no idea how she recognized me like this, but I didn't have time for her.

Nor did I have time for the other women attracted by the woman's cry.

I reached the double doors for the master bedroom in moments.

These doors, closed for millions of years and unmoving for any of the Island's women's efforts, parted for my tiny tentacles.

The room was large and impressive, but I saw none of it.

I only had eyes for the bed and its occupants.

I froze, even as two pairs of blue arms picked me up, and I found myself surrounded by the most beautiful women I had ever had the pleasure to see.

If I could cry, I probably would have.

Upon a mattress large enough to house a dozen bodies.

Curled around a cat I had not seen since before I was put in the cell in the Asylum.

Was Melina.

There was still so much to do.

Introductions, explanations, and experiments.

I needed a new body.

I needed to know more about this world.

I needed to talk to Death and thank her.

I needed romance the fuck out of a baker's dozen women.

But that was all for the future.

I had done it.

I got my happy ending.

Author's Note:

Did I not promise you a power fantasy?

Did I not promise you wish fulfillment?

Did I not promise you a HAPPY ENDING?!

ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED!!!!

Jokes aside, this marks the last of Volume 1.

I hope it has been worth the wait.

To simplify the first part, Mikael sent the women to himself in the past. To help train himself and give him the idea that got him out of the cell. This triggered the Rep's trap early, making him aware that his avatars are puppets that anyone bound can control. He was in more danger because he didn't have the defences yet, so his mind wasn't safe from that control, but he had to send them back to avoid a paradox. Again, he was missing the Paradox Defence.

I have a short side story planned to round out the explanation I lightly touched on in this chapter. I also hope this chapter has answered a few questions you have had about the 'World' the rest of this story takes place in. I will discuss the exact mechanics in Volume 2, but, as I have said before, this is not a canon world.

I will repeat, NOT CANON.

I generally do not like composite worlds because, ironically, authors try too hard to stick to canon, which often contradicts each other. I will be liberal with discarding elements that don't fit.

Ironically the Worm aspect fits perfectly. The basic premise of Worm could have slotted into both DC and Marvel without actually conflicting with them and be a part of many arcs. I hope I will do world-building justice. I won't spoil too much. Just say that these are still the 'early' days of the Justice League, though heroes have been around for longer. In one form or another.

That's all for now. I'll see you all next Friday.

SIDE STORY I:
MIKAEL WHEEL, MIKAEL DEAL

I remember the day
And remember it well.
All I had left
For me to sell,
Was the time that I had,
My talent, my dream.
I was out on my own,
Or so it would seem.

"Good day," the salaryman said. "Thank you for joining us."

He was the most aggressively dull man I had ever seen.

A face that was neither round nor angular. Hair that wasn't bright or dark. Eyes that didn't shine and a smile so insincere you knew he would rather down a bottle of pills than keep talking. Though he wore a well-fitted, clean black-and-white suit and shirt, he somehow made it look worn out.

The room matched the dull man.

It was a conference room, one made in the style of thousands of others. A triangular table, meant for a half dozen people, was only occupied by the three of us. In its center was a device you could connect a laptop to, allowing you to share your screen with the display board against one wall. Its walls were plain, not cold but not warm. The chairs we were seated in were comfortable enough to not be considered painful.

There were no windows.

"Of course," I replied by well-practiced instinct. I had been in hundreds of meeting rooms like this. I knew the banal formalities by heart. That didn't stop the kernel of worry in my gut. You needed to prepare for meetings. I had no notes, no idea of the topics. To be honest, I had no clue where I was at all. "Thanks for making the time to meet."

Even as I turned to this little board room's third and final occupant, I forgot the boring salaryman's features.

Not that there were any of note.

She, too, was a study of black and white, though she was the opposite of Dull McBoring.

Her skin was a pale white. Like she had never seen the sun in her life. Her hair was as black as pitch, as was her clothing. Far from being dressed formally, her jeans and spaghetti strap shirt were highly casual. Combined with her tattoo, an Eye of Horus

around her actual eye, her studded belt, and her black gloves, she would have looked more at home in a poetry reading than in a boardroom. I liked her necklace, though the Ankh was a bit large for my taste. Too clunky.

She smiled at me.

Unlike the plastic one the dull man wore, it was a soft, compassionate smile.

I relaxed a little. If she could get away with wearing that, this probably wasn't too formal a place.

"We should begin," the man said. He pressed a button on a panel in front of him. "Begining final offer. Participants are myself, acting as Company Representative. Death, in her capacity as Patron, as well as customer/vendor. Subject #MHL6987@%^EI, henceforth referred to as Mikael. Everyone present and of sound mind?"

"Present." The woman said.

"Present and in as sound a mind as I ever am," I said, plastering on my 'charming business smile'. Unlike this dreary man, I knew the value of not only being professional but likable. Too genuine, and you risked looking unprofessional. Too remote, and you looked fake.

I was curious about what was going on.

I didn't feel like I was dreaming, but when the salaryman had listed out the subject number, only parts of his words made sense. Like his voice was coming through an old CRT with static trouble. Either way, whether I was dreaming or hallucinating, I would have to act like this was happening and proceed accordingly.

It was the only way to live.

That and the suit I found myself wearing was very nice. Nicer than anything I had ever worn before. It felt and breathed much better than silk.

Would they let me keep it when this was over?

"Relevant procedures are: Patron Request Form Q&*9. Black-Mark Protocol. Exception Policy 34{!@082TBNG#S%GH. Standard M-P package. Redundancy case seven in progress." The odd static repeated as the man droned on, his voice bored out of his mind.

I could sympathize.

I've dealt with enough repeated and pointless meetings to know sometimes you would rather be doing anything else.

"Please verify that this is your employment application." He pushed another button, and the screen on the wall lit up. I stared at it, uncomprehending what I was reading for a moment.

Then I finally put the pieces together about what I was looking at and what was happening.

“I did fill out the Waifu Catalogue this way,” I answered The Company Representative.

“Subject Mikael has pleaded guilty, proceeding with meeting.” He droned.

“Guilty? What?” Now lost again, I looked to the Rep, the woman, and back.

“I think,” the goth woman, Death, said before the Rep could continue. “It would be better to explain for our future working relationship.”

The Rep sighed. Like he was being asked to do some great duty he really didn’t want to engage with. Whatever fake energy he had when we started this meeting was already wearing thin.

“Very well,” he said. He picked up a laser pointer and directed the green dot to a particular line of my choices. “You recognize this option?”

“Black-Mark. A DLC, if I remember right.” I frowned in thought, trying to pull up the memory. I had written that story a month ago and hadn’t thought about it since. That kernel of worry was now a full-blown hole in my gut. “Gives you 80% of your starting credits in exchange for not getting any for captures and not being able to make any purchases after.”

“Correct, it also flags all applicants who select it as non-compliant. All those who fill out the waifu catalogue, as you know it, are marked as applicants for positions. We seed the various forms with flags to help weed out those who would not prove profitable to The Company. The Black-Mark, as the name suggests, voids any sort of application. Those who choose it aren’t willing to play ball for one reason or another. The standard procedure is to ignore them. All their applications are void.”

“Ok,” I said slowly, not seeing where he was going with this. If my ‘application’ was void, why was I here?

I had chosen the Black Mark because it made sense for my writing story. I wasn’t planning a long-run thing, just a One-shot. It had been a fun little jaunt, a crack fic about how easy it was to power game the Catalogue. Despite the Soulsborne worlds being Deathworlds, the inherent logic of those worlds ensured that even a level 1 scrub, if they were determined enough, could kill gods.

Strictly speaking, if I wanted to be really silly, I would have simply gotten Inexaustable Talent and Lancer Artoria. We then Rhongominiad our way through the world, blowing anything up that looks at us funny.

The theory was sound.

That is what Morgan was doing in Lostbelt 6.

I chose the other nine women because of my conservative investing nature. A diverse portfolio is a safe one. Everything else, the talents, defences, and the Dragon heritage, was

me playing with the wish fulfilment options.

As I said, it was a silly little story.

“Just because your application was void doesn’t mean the Company didn’t receive it.” Death said. “And, as soon as they did, I noticed. You fit my requirements.”

“Death is one of our Premium Patrons,” the Rep continued, sounding exhausted. “This entitles her to certain privileges most do not have access to, our discard pile included. She requested we waive your Void status. She was most… insistent.” He almost hissed the word.

Again, I could feel some sympathy for the man. I had dealt with plenty of customers who wanted exceptions made for them. The Karens of the world, who thought they were owed things because ‘the customer was always right’.

Death smiled smugly, looking impish.

“How does that make me guilty of anything?” I asked, feeling frustrated. Almost angry. It was a pet peeve of mine. I hated being accused of things I didn’t do.

“Standard procedure in such cases,” the Rep droned on, uncaring for my frustration. “Is to apply for an exemption form. She did and was approved, so long as she paid the upcharge fee and agreed to the M-P package. At that point, we should have followed the instructions in the package. You would be dropped into the world, and we wouldn’t be here.” He sighed again.

“I asked for this meeting.” Death clarified. “It’ll clarify a few things, and I will only proceed with the process if you agree.”

“Agree to what? I didn’t sign up for a Patron. I don’t do well with bosses I can’t get rid of.” I had terrible bosses and good bosses in the past. The latter was the rarer case.

“I’m not going to be your boss,” Death told me. “We’re going to be partners, co-conspirators if you wish.”

“Ok,” I said, holding up my hand to stop her. That was something I could latch on to. It was leverage. I now recognized this for what it was. A negotiation, not a meeting. It was essential to control the flow of negotiation. “Let’s take things one step at a time. I get that my choice with the Waifu Catalogue blacklisted me. You still want me to be ‘recruited’. We can get to why later. So, if I agree and am recruited, what does it mean? And what is the M-P package?”

“M-P stands for Monkey’s Paw. Should you agree,” the Rep said the word with a tired sneer, like the idea of consent was beneath him. “You will be provided everything you applied for. You will be sent to a Soulsborne series of worlds.”

“What’s the twist?” I asked, looking at the ‘man’ dubiously. Let him talk. The more I knew, the more I could control. “You literally just said it’s a monkey’s paw. So, how are

you going to screw me over?"

"You will be alone," Death said. "No companions, no dragon, no defences. Just you, your talents, and lures. Anyone you bind will also disappear, so you can't recruit others and give them the catalogue benefits. More than that, even if you beat one game, you will simply move to the next, then the next. Over and over, forever."

"That sounds… terrible. Really awful." I almost laughed at her. "Why on earth would I agree to that? I'm a sadist, not a masochist. I like those games, but I know how much their worlds suck. Especially since I've never fought a day in my life. Being stuck there forever sounds like actual hell."

"Not forever," Death smiled impishly again. "The prison lasts forever. That is Company Policy. They personalize M-P packages based on the person for whom they are forced to make an exception. Petty revenge. What better way to screw a Dragon of Freedom than to put them in a never-ending prison? But that's the thing, going to the jail is the punishment. Nothing says you have to stay there. I wouldn't have spent all this for someone to be trapped forever."

"So you bust me out?" I asked, trying to see what the plan was. They had come to this negotiation with clear intent and goals and knew what this was about. I was playing catch-up.

Thankfully, this wasn't the first time I had to do so.

"No," the Rep said in his tired voice. "You are alone. No outside help is allowed while you are in your chosen worlds."

"Then?" Keep them talking. Keep them talking.

"Your actual body will be the dragon form you purchased." The Rep elaborated. "What will be 'imprisoned' will be avatars. Your avatars will be puppets. Controllable from the outside. The body will be resting. If you manage to wake it, you will be able to free yourself by nature of your Element and Dragon Break. That is the condition we have agreed on. It is how you will 'escape'."

"Seems a bit complicated," I said, turning over ideas in my head. "How do I wake it up?"

"There are several ways," Death said. "If you manage to reach 'max level', meaning get to a level of power where you can't grow anymore, the excess will flow to the Dragon waking it up. That is the one I am counting on. Others include somehow linking your mind to the dragon body, reversing the nature of the world you are in or destroying the 'cell'. They are all theoretically possible, just highly unlikely."

"So escape is possible," I nodded, a plan already forming in my mind if I decided to go through with this. That was a big 'if'.

“Your avatars will forget this entire conversation,” Death said dryly. “You won’t know the conditions for attaining your Freedom. So you won’t know to grind for currency.”

“Why?” I asked, frowning. How had she known my plan? Were they reading my mind? No! I couldn’t fall into that trap. Overestimating the other side could be worse than underestimating them. Keep them talking. “Why are we even having this conversation then if I’m going to forget it?”

“Your avatars will not remember,” the Rep droned. “Your actual self, the Dragon, will remember once you serve your time. Though I do agree, why are we here?”

“We are here,” Death said severely, staring at the Rep and myself. “Because I would rather work with a willing man than a slave. Especially when I will be counting on them for the rest of time. I have followed proper procedure and abided by all contracts with The Company. Though this is an exception to the Black-Mark Policy, it is still within the bounds of your operations. It is suboptimal for all involved. I would rather he be free with his purchases, and you would rather not deal with him. Mikael has been taken from his world with barely an explanation and threatened with hell on earth for checking a box on an online form. He has still acted more professionally than you.”

Far from being chastised, the Rep just rubbed his eyes.

I was ecstatic, though I didn’t show it.

She had just given me everything I needed.

They were not a united front.

I was the one that decided whether a deal was made.

“Once you manage to attain your freedom,” Death turned back to me and continued to explain. “You’ll be able to control both your avatar and your body, but I suggest you wait until your dragon body grows to its peak before doing anything. You can travel to the pocket space you purchased. All the women you chose will be there. Get to know them and explain what is going on. Try to seduce a few. That sort of thing. I’ll be able to compress the time for you so it will only feel like a few months or a few years rather than the long time it will take you to reach the peak of tier 10.”

“Why do you want me to wait?” I asked before a better question came to mind. “Why should I wait in the first place? What stopping me from taking off with Dragon Break the second I get free?” Each of them had to have their own traps. The fine print. The Company was plain about theirs, though I wouldn’t be surprised if some hidden mines were placed. The question was; could the benefits outweigh the risks of the dangers?

“Nothing will be stopping you,” she nodded, acknowledging the point. “However, I will hold on to your Defences as an incentive. I will give them back to you once to reach your peak. It just makes better sense for you to pass the time quickly and quietly,

gathering strength before you go galavanting around the multiverse."

"So I go from maximum security to minimum security?" I organized my thoughts, asking another question to verify I had what I needed to know. "Anything else I need to be aware of about my 'sentence'?"

"No," the Rep sighed. "You will start in the world of Dark Souls 1, in the Asylum. Everything from there is up to you alone. Even if you bind someone, you will never get any credits and can make no purchases. The only method of binding still allowed will be through your bite since you paid for it. All others, those usually included in the Catalogue, will not work. Despite this exception, we will enforce the Black-Mark's full effects. You will never have contact with The Company again, nor will we interfere with anything you do."

"That is The Company done," I said, turning to face Death fully. "They are following procedure to make an example out of me. I get that. Exceptions are bad for a business. But what are you getting out of this? As I said, I never signed up for a Patron."

"I get you," she said to me. I deadpanned at her, which made her laugh lightly. "I am serious. Most patrons choose their agents either to act as mercenaries or to gather more credits. We get a cut of credits for any capture that our agents achieve. We have a separate store we use. The more credits you have, the more options available. Since you are Marked, I will not be making any sort of profit by being your Patron. In fact, I have invested so much in purchasing this exception that it will be eons before I gain enough to make it back into Premium status. All I get out of this is you."

"Why me?"

"Because you fit my goal perfectly," she leaned forward to grab my hand over the table. The angle allowed me to stare down her shirt, but I ignored it. I could be horny when not on business. "Your purchases are so in-line with my wishes that I thought it was a prank at first. Firstly, your only control was the Command Spells. Those can be resisted or negated entirely since they are not fiat-backed. Second, you willingly chose to forgo controls, yet included lures tell me a lot. A willingness to skirt traditional morality but still retain a bottom line. I do not need a hero or a villain. I have enough of those."

"Third?"

"The third reason is the most important one." She tightened her grip on my hand. Her smile, once impish, widened into a pure expression of joy. "There are many who fit those two criteria. Only you do so while choosing the Freedom Element with your Dragon Heritage."

"I also chose Life," I pointed out, but she waived her other hand. Keep her talking.

"Life dragons, while powerful and hard to kill, are a dime a doze. Do you know how

rare it is for someone to not only choose the dragon heritage but choose something as abstract as Freedom? The best way to describe it would be one in a Googleplex. Human imagination, as limitless as it is, is often repetitive. Then for the Element in question to be as open-ended and powerful as 'freedom'? After watching multiple realities for millennia, you are the first to have that unique combination that fits perfectly to my criteria."

"By the very nature of the multiverse theory, nothing is unique." I pointed out, trying to poke holes in their logic to reveal inconsistencies. Though they were 'higher beings', I felt no need to fear either. Fear could be useful if it helps survival. Since they were so far beyond me, feeling fear or not produces the same result. "Even if no one else makes the same choices, which I don't believe is true, other versions of myself would still fit your criteria."

"You are the seventh version of Mikael we have talked to," the Rep said. He sounded so done with the world I wanted to tell him to take a nap. Or drugs. One of the two. Still, that narrowed my options. I had something they wanted, but I didn't have a monopoly. "Should you decline, we shall move on to number eight. It would be easier if we just took one of you, but she paid for the redundancy package."

"If I waited long enough, I might even find someone who isn't Marked." Death acknowledged. "Just because I have a long time doesn't mean I will procrastinate forever. It is better to seize chances, even if they may be costly."

"But why do you want me?" She had told me why me, but not what she actually wanted.

"It is better to show you."

She let go of my hand and leaned back in her chair.

Between one moment in the next, she changed.

It wasn't shapeshifting or the rearrangement of her features. It was more complete than that.

Where before Death of the Endless sat, Lady Death from the Evil Ernie series now sat. White skin, silver hair, wearing the equivalent of leather straps to hide her more generous curves.

You know how I said being horny was for when I wasn't on business?

I was wrong.

Then, mercifully, she changed again.

Her clothes covered more of her. Her skin went from white to gray. Her head turned into a skull. In less than an eye-blink, she was Death from the Marvel universes.

Then she was of the Endless again, smiling at me softly.

"I can do others," she said. "Male or female. I am any and all personifications of

Death. Thanatos and Hades. Hel and Odin. Anubis and Osirus. Ahriman. The Grim Reaper. The Black and the Rot. Ogbunabali and Iku. Mot and Ereshkigal. Chernobog and The Morrigan. Mara and Kalma. Yanluo Wang and Izanami. Degei and Whiro. Mictecacihuatl and Mictlantecuhtli. Ixtab and Pana.

So long as sapient life has existed, I have been there. When they dream of their last step, they dream of me. I am there when they are born. I am there when they die. I was there when the multiverse came into existence. I will be there to turn off the lights. I am Death. And I am utterly alone."

It was all I could do not to sarcastically reply to her declaration; 'cool story, bro'. While it was impressive and did give me a better grasp of who I was dealing with, she hadn't answered my question.

What did she want me to do?

"You cannot be totally alone," I pointed to the Rep, who had laid out on his folded arms and was dozing away. "You were part of the Company subscription or whatever. That means you are one of many."

"Do you know what separates the upper Tiers? What is the difference between Tier 10, which has no ceiling on power, and Tier 11?" She asked rhetorically. "It is control. Whatever world they are in, or multiverse in some cases, Tier 11 is the absolute pinnacle of power and control. They represent fundamental forces of their realities. But that is their own limit. They are limited in scope to their own universes or multiverses. They cannot 'crossover'. I am not Tier 11.

I am Tier 12. I am beyond the scope of your imagination. I am not Death of the Endless or Lady Death. I am all its forms, for realities your world hasn't dreamed of yet. My limit is that, for all my power and control, I am the only one of my kind in my own tiny slice of existence."

She paused for a moment, tilting her head.

"Actually, I am closer to Tier 12.5," she said with a smile. "Because I have Company Access as a Patron. And that is where you come in. Unlike other Tier 12s, I can do something about my limited status. You, who are Free to grow without bounds. Who is Tier 10 upon your inception but has no limit. More than that, you, by nature, are Freedom for all who follow you. They, too, will grow beyond the bounds of the Catalogue. Slower, perhaps, but they will all reach that point eventually. Just by existing, you will provide me ten beings my equal."

"And what is after that?" I asked, morbidly curious. "What is Tier 13?"

"I have no clue," she said with a laugh. It was a pretty laugh, like the wind through the trees.

I didn't let it distract me.

"So you want me to bind you?" I asked. Why else had she mentioned the lack of controls being significant? "Then, not only do you have 'equals' but also can theoretically reach Tier 13, whatever it is. You are also not compelled to love me, follow my orders, and are strong enough to ignore the Command Seals."

"That is the plan, yes," she nodded, her smile softening. "Only, as a Tier 12, I am not bound by the Catalogue. There is a reason we are not listed. It isn't as simple to bind me as a little love bite. First off, you need to reach Tier 11 at a minimum. Then you have to achieve omnipotence. It doesn't have to be complete. It can be limited to a small area. Once you have the power and control needed, I can enter your area of control and, using your Element, you can bridge the gap between us for a short time to 'bind' me."

"That's why you want me to wait till I reach the peak of Tier 10," I nodded.

"The Dragon Heritage, even without your Element, has the best growth potential. It takes a while, but even someone who hasn't invested enough points to start at high tiers will reach 10 after a hundred million years, give or take. They will be blocked there, however. Once you reach your peak, you must experiment with your power and gain control. The World I will place you in, while not a 'Deathworld'," I chuckled at the pun. Laughing at others' jokes was essential to make them like you better. It showed common ground. "Will have enough conflict and challenge to drive you to improve."

"Following the theory of wuxia mentors everywhere," I nodded, rubbing my chin in thought. The words flowed from me, but my focus was on the subcontext. I would be peak Tier 10 but still not able to steamroll everything. That was a problem. "No growth without danger."

"You could travel the Multiverse if you wish once you are at your peak," Death explained. "But I chose one of my worlds I think you would enjoy. My calculations place you reaching your peak state at an interesting time."

"What is the internet like?" I asked with a smile. I was stalling for time, putting my thoughts in order. There was an opportunity here if I could grasp it. "If I am going to be stuck in medieval worlds like the Soulseborne for a while, I will want to spend time just vegging out. I am talking full couch potato. Books, games, anything that will not involve moving at all."

"The internet won't be invented for tens of millions of years in that world," Death deadpanned, rolling her eyes. When the embodiment of the end of life does it, it is the most Dead of pans. She answered anyway. "9G, if you must know."

I whistled.

"Ok, I am willing to agree," Death's smile widened, and the Rep sat up from his doze

to look at me with hope. “On a few conditions.”

I do not know if they didn’t care, never had practice, were fed up with failed attempts from other versions of myself, or were just bad at making deals but both the Company Rep and Death had made a few mistakes that I could exploit.

Maybe they thought that I, a regular mortal, was without my own tricks.

While making deals, you want to keep your cards close to your chest. Never reveal your bottom line because it gives the opponent all they need to know to maximize their gains.

There is a bottom line all participants have. Their main goals for a deal. So long as the bottom lines are not mutually exclusive, an agreement can be made and both sides profit. A good negotiator can take that excess space between bottom lines and shift it to their sides.

In college, I once had a project for an international business class. The idea was simple. Everyone has a list of ‘assets’ and needs to make a deal to grow. The better the agreement for you, the better your grade.

I had been paired with a girl who knew nothing of business or negotiation. Once I realized that, I straight up asked what her bottom line was.

She told me.

I am not heartless, so I coached her a bit, and by the end of the class, she had gotten a solid B.

I got an A+.

I matched her bottom line and threw on a few items that weren’t important to my ‘Company’, but I took the rest for myself because I knew her bottom line and matched it.

Death and the Company Rep had made the same mistake as a college student.

The Rep was clearly a common salaryman type, one more concerned with following procedure and getting a paycheck than maximizing his opportunities.

Death probably did not make too many deals, being the pinnacle of powers in her multiverse.

Both were older than me by orders of magnitude, but age did not translate to experience or experience.

Time to get my business on.

“I can tell you right away why the other versions of me declined,” I told the pair. Giving them this would endear them to me over my ‘competition’. “It’s just not worth it, as it is now.” At the same time, I couldn’t be seen as flattering them.

“What do you mean?” Death asked, leaning forward to stare into my eyes.

“I will be going to some of the hardest and grimmest game worlds on offer. I will be

going alone, with no help and not remembering our deal. The defences aren't a problem. They wouldn't help much in those worlds besides maybe nullifying the Abyss DLC with Time Defence. I won't miss them. The key is a lack of information and security. I have no guarantee I will ever manage this 'prison break'. I could be there for who knows how long, going through dozens of worlds." Emphasizing the costs I will be paying will make larger price points more reasonable.

"I have already thought about that," Death assured me. "I have set things up that you should be free after five worlds rather than dozens. You'll start in Dark Souls, 1, 2 and 3 to get you used to fighting. Give your Talents time to blossom. This will also lull you into a false sense of security, thinking you just need to beat the Soul of Cinder. Then you'll go to Elden Ring. I hope that what you experience there will shock you enough to realize you need to break free. Afterwards, it will be Bloodborne. Not only will you be familiar with it, but I hope you will delve into the chalice dungeons to gain answers. In the process, you will naturally reach the 'max level'."

"While that plan does have its merit," I told Death slowly. I didn't let her see my excitement.

Elden Ring!

I was so hyped for that game that it wasn't even funny. Being able to play it from the ultimate first-person perspective would be awesome. But getting drawn into the hype train would not help my negotiation position.

"There is one big flaw in all this," I pointed out. "I have no guarantee I won't go hollow in the first game. I like to think I have better mental fortitude than the average joe, but even I do not think I will be able to retain my sanity. After one death? Certainly. Ten? Maybe. A hundred? Definitely not. And I will die a lot. Even with the Talents, without teachers or a safe way to train, it will be a trial by fire in the most literal sense."

"I cannot influence the worlds you go to," Death reminded me.

"Relax," I nodded to both her and the Rep. That Death said that meant she was willing to make concessions and play ball. I had them! "I am requesting simple things that can be achieved quite easily before I am even sent off. Insurance and incentive. Are you familiar with the Korean web novel, The Returner?"

Death looked at me, tilted her head and blinked.

"I am now."

"While I am not a fan of how it turned out in the later chapters, I think the premise is useful in this situation." I didn't let her casual display of omniscience faze me. This was essential. "To be specific, in the book, the character is locked to one state of being. He is unable to forget his life on earth or die. It constantly drives him to seek a way out of the

world he is trapped in, even after thousands of years. Unable to give in or die. The Soulsborne genre will take care of the death issue. I can't imagine Miyazaki making a world where death is permanent for the MC. It is the mental aspect I want. That will be my insurance. If you can give me a way to never forget my life, thus never going hollow, it will go a long way to making sure I can eventually escape."

Death looked to the Rep, who seemed fully awake for the first time since the meeting began.

"If you use your Life element." He said, typing away at something on a laptop that hadn't been there a moment before. "Rather than be more robust or hard to kill, it will focus on the mental aspects of remembering your 'life'. Combine it with the mental aspect of Freedom, and it will be possible. Since it is not physical help and comes from yourself, it shouldn't be a problem. It will all be self-inflicted, so you can let go of those memories if you are persistent and focused enough on throwing off the effect. Maybe a day or two of dedicated concentration."

"Then I am guaranteed to escape eventually," I nodded. Basic contractual safety guarantees were the bases of any working relationships. "Unless I give up willingly for some reason, the memories should push me onwards."

"That was the insurance," Death said. "What about the incentive?"

"Credits," I said plainly. Though I had tried to min-max as much of the original story as possible, I still hadn't been able to purchase everything I wanted. "Once we kick this off, I will never be able to purchase things from the Catalogue. I will go through hell and live for millions of years, all so you can achieve your goals. I want to be paid upfront for that effort. Think of it as hazard pay."

If this was all real, and I had to treat it like it was, then getting as much out of it as possible was the only way to go.

"Again, that is possible," the Rep said, still typing at his computer. "Death would need to pay the fee for Patron Income, one thousand credits, after the conversion rate for three for one, but there would be no issue with paying upfront. You would need to not edit the original decisions, voiding this entire negotiation, but buying extra before deployment isn't against Policy."

Death drummed her fingers on the table in thought before shrugging.

"Why the hell not," she smiled at me. "I can always Patronize a few others to gather credits if this doesn't work out. Most people who fill out the Catalogue like to collect targets, after all. I've already invested most of what I had, might as well go all in. I have 8200 left. After conversion, that is 2733. 1000 need to pay the fee gives you 1733 to play with. More than the base value of a Tier 9 World."

“That should be barely enough,” I nodded, faking a grimace. Inside I felt joyful. This, kids, was why learning the basics of negotiation was important. I had been hoping to get a few hundred credits. Five hundred at max. I had tripled my estimate by keeping my mouth shut, knowing their bottom line, and pitching things my way.

“Then please fill out this form,” the Rep pushed a few buttons on his laptop, and a screen opened on the table in front of me.

It was the familiar home screen of the Waifu Catalogue. The thing that had started this all.

I ignored most tabs, focusing on demi-planes, talents, and perks.

The only Defence I did not purchase initially was Creature Defence. No point buying it now since, by the time Defences came into play, I would be Tier 10. Any creature that could fuck with me then would not be deterred by the Defence.

I did not purchase any more Companions, despite what my dick was telling me, because I felt trying to juggle ten was already more than I could handle. There was a reason in the original story I had not written any romance and instead dropped them all off at their home worlds.

My first purchase was a small one, but very important to me. For only 15 credits, I got to bring along not just stuff from home but my cat. I wasn’t willing to leave her behind, not knowing what would happen to her. She was Mine.

For my second purchase, I bought the remaining Talents and shared a few with my companions. I also purchased a few more Lures that would make life easier for the heck of it. Then I bought ‘Trajectory. Agreement’. to maximize my ability to travel dimensions since Dragon Break was a bit vague.

I paused, a thought coming to mind.

“Can I prebuy perks for Companion I haven’t bound?” The Rep tilted his head in question, so I elaborated. “Anthropomorphize, for example. If I purchase 10, I can use them at my discretion. But if I buy five now, can I hold them in reserve for people I want to use it on.” I thought of all the fantastic AI, Gynoid, Undead, Robot or other non-human waifus.

“You can pre-purchase,” he nodded. “But you won’t be able to control their assignment as that is a perk of buying in bulk. They will be assigned as soon as you bind someone who can benefit from them.”

I nodded and bought five, just in case.

I thought about buying added potential for chakra, magic circuits, or Reiryoku but decided against it. The first was only valuable if you dedicated enormous effort and time to train it. The other two could be replaced with regular magic that anyone could learn,

depending on the world.

From there, not a lot caught my eye. I had more credits than I knew how to use. So I dumped a whole bunch into Sweet Home. I turned it into a demi-plane, gave it the creature feature, and pumped the size.

If it was going to be my eternal home, I wanted to be as comfortable as possible. I thought about messing with the 'law' section but decided against it. I wasn't a bit fan of absolute control.

The only other purchase of note was I invested a hundred credits to give Artoria Avalon. Unlike the website, the Company app lets me select to provide it to any version of Nasuverse Arthur. The one I had purchased was the Lancer/Lion King/Bunny version. With Rhongominyad, unlimited mana, and Avalon? If she decided to stay with me after this all was over, she would be as close to invincible as she could be.

I went over the whole thing a few times to be sure.

I'm sure I would regret something in the future, to buyer's remorse if nothing else.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried.

I was gambling with my life here.

No matter what happened, I was in for a hell of a time.

Three things pushed me forward.

The incentive, for one. It was a lot of credits, after all.

The second was the world I was going to. If it had been a Wuxia, Xianxia, or Xuanhuan world, then you could not give me all the credits in the universe to go there. The original concept of the Soulsborn genre was that anyone could beat the game. A naked man with no weapon, with enough skill, can kill the King of the Gods. I was afraid of pain and death, but they were not wholly unfamiliar to me, so I could handle that part.

The third reason was a simple one, born of a small dream decades ago.

Flight.

I could understand why other versions of myself would decline.

Maybe I was braver, stupider, or more opportunistic.

Perhaps I dreamed bigger.

Either way, I was doing this.

I firmed my will.

"All set," I said as I pushed the 'Finish Build' button on the screen.

Death took a deep breath, smiling at me. She had that smile on this entire meeting, but now it was a fraction wider. A tiny bit more real.

"Wonderful," she said. "I'll look forward to working with you in the future."

The Rep stood and held out his hand.

I shook it.

“I just want to thank you,” he said in his sleepy voice. Though I had been in the same room as this man for a while, I was sure I would forget every one of his features as soon as I left. “Death was right about you being professional. Most people, the ones we talk to at least, are much worse. Screaming, crying, begging, in denial. If I have to listen to one more weeb whine about being dead, I will shoot myself a half-dozen times.”

“No problem,” I said, not commenting despite dearly wishing to. “Even if this is a dream, which I don’t think it is at this point, I should still treat it like it’s real. Do we need to sign anything?”

This whole ‘meeting’ had felt like a fever dream. I had tried to treat it as real, to live up to my beliefs, but some things still seemed absurd.

Like shaking the hands of a man who, now that I could look closely, didn’t have a face at all.

“No need,” he shook his head. Though he spoke, I saw no mouth. “Your consent was a luxury, not a requirement. You agreed when you filled out the application the first time. You made this as painless as can be expected.” He smiled then. The tired smile of a man getting off a 12-hour shift. The smile of a man who just pulled a prank on an annoying customer. He still had no mouth. I just knew he was smiling. “No hard feelings. Just Company Policy.”

And then I was gone.

Author's Note:

I promised to finish Volume 1 on September 2nd, and here we are.

I released the first chapter on June 7th on QQ, and here we are three months later and 150K words deep (not counting the author's notes). Averaging 1.7k words a day is insane to me. Nothing compared to some authors, but to me, it seems significant.

This side story was written before anything else in late May. I rewrote it this last week and worked with Darklord331, who was kind enough to volunteer to help me to flesh it out a bit more.

It is a bit more exposition-heavy than I like, but I hope it has answered some questions people have. I have tried to portray how everyone has their own reasons for their actions, even if they don't make sense in a vacuum. A Logical Insanity, if you will.

I have been consulting it constantly to try and keep the story straight. I'm sure I have made some minor errors, that is what editing is for, but I am largely happy I have managed to stay consistent.

For context, when deciding how many credit Death would have, I rolled a D100 x100.

I rolled a 2.

Since that wasn't enough to pay the basic fee, and thus the premise of the fic, I rolled again and got 82. I divided it by 3 because Patron Income should only come in once every 3 days. The mere idea of Patrons, beings who aren't tiered 11 in the Catalogue, means that a 'Tier 12' is necessary. Depending on when I get the chance, I'll release the build later today or tomorrow.

Now for the sad news.

I have gotten a lot of pushback from people who are, understandably, concerned with the multi-cross nature of the Superhero world the rest of this story will take place in.

This has not stopped me from wanting to continue Rapturous Rhapsody.

I repeat I will keep writing this fic!

Remember, Volume 1 was the 'prologue' to the fic I originally wanted to write.

What it has done is encourage me to take a few weeks off to make sure my plans are as rock-solid as I can make them. So here's the plan, I will take a two-week hiatus to go over everything and come back more prepared.

So the first chapter of Volume 2 will come out on September 23rd.

I'll see you all then.

Ps: For those worried about the time travel aspect explained in the last chapter, don't be. I explicitly stated that it only worked because Mikael was only communing with himself in a limited capacity. He is too young (Great One standards) to be able to casually time travel. Think of it as a reverse time capsule. He sent images (the waifus) back and got items in return. He

didn't allow 'living' things to come through, so he didn't paradox himself out of existence. (The past him would have tried to munchkin his way to freedom.)

*I do not plan for time travel to be an important part of this fic going forward. *Shocked comic fan faces* Mikael's entire existence kind of negates that, with the whole 'unbound from fate' thing.*

QUESTION CORNER III

As I finished organizing the plan for the next volume, I felt like I should reaffirm that I am not dead and I am still committed to writing this story. What better way to do that than with a Question Corner?

Specifically about what to expect from the fic and the World.

For those expecting this fic to go on for millions of words, I am sorry to disappoint but I am a big believer in only writing a story after you know how it will end. I love fanfiction and other online self-publications because you see the most varied of stories in them that you don't find in other media. The problem is that too often a fic is A) never updated B) keeps going just to keep going and pad the word count or C) the initial promise of the fic is never achieved.

I originally conceived it as a two Volume product, (stare at the 150k word prologue) it has now become a trilogy. What this means is that you can expect only two more Volumes. This means that unless I wish to have too many loose threads, I naturally have to limit myself to certain characters, storylines, and ideas. In a way, I feel regretful that I will be losing out on the opportunity to play with certain elements of Marvel/Worm/DC but I decided it was worth it.

Worst comes to worst, I can come back in the future for one-shots, omakes, or mini-arcs.

So, what will this look like?

I want the entire story to build upon itself. Volume 1 into 2 into 3. I have arcs, both character and plot, that will fall from one point to another like dominoes. All building up to what I hope will be a satisfying conclusion. This means that some things need to be in focus while others fall by the wayside. The world will move while we are not looking. Characters will go through adventures we cannot see as they pass through our vision, only staying so long as they serve to help the story progress. I cannot promise your favourite superhero characters will get a lot of screen time, as I already have a cast I will struggle to give a fair shake.

What does this mean for the World?

First off, as I have said many times before, this world is non-canon. I cannot emphasize this enough. Once chapters 1 and 2 of the next volume come out you will see how much cannon of all three continuities are borked. Worm especially as it finds itself in a world with monoliths like DC and Marvel. Some storylines from all three will play a part, but do not expect one continuity.

Secondly, any more crossovers are right out. When I was first writing this fic in early 2022 I had initially planned for more Nasuverse and MHA verse elements but I cut them, as well as other crossovers because they simply did not fit the narrative I had planned. To be honest, I went through various periods of back and forth for all three of the current components but ended up deciding that all three were crucial to the ending I had envisioned. Too many crossovers and you lose the plot in the weeds. That has been one of my biggest complaints with WC stories (except for those ones ;)) and multi-crossovers is they include elements that aren't needed.

Thirdly, as of right now, I have no intentions of expanding the 'harem'. Not only due to the reasons stated above, i.e. proper screen time and development, but also because I feel that any who joined now, after the 'prologue' would lack that connection to the other characters. I am not saying it is impossible, as I like to sometimes let characters write their own stories. I am only saying that, as I promised in the very first chapter this is not a 'catch 'em all' fic. I am sorry to say (and it physically pains me to write this) that most of comic books' greatest hotties will have to give this one a miss.

I've rambled a bit, but I hope this question corner has served to not only remind you that I have not abandoned this story during its hiatus, but that I am also giving serious consideration to the 'World'.

I also hope this has served to make you excited for the next two volumes.

I certainly am.

BUILD (FAKE)

Starting World: Soulsborne

Starting budget 1545

Intensity

Me and My Girlfriend(s)(PvE) +0 [1545]

Black-mark +1236 [2781]

Dropped-In -0 [2781]

Heritage

Dragon Heart -80 [2701]

Dragon Scale[Freedom] -95 [2606]

Dragon Aura -200 [2406]

Dragon Thrall -150 [2256]

Dragon Blood -150 [2106]

Treasure Hoard -20 [2086]

Dragon Cabin -30 [2056]

Dragon Bifurcation -25 [2031]

Dragon Break -20 [2011]

Double Dragon[Life] -200 [1811]

Lures

Sticky Fingers -5 [1806]

Faerie Feast -10 [1796]

Potpourri -20 [1776]

Sticky Fingers: Brown Sugar -15 [1761]

Faerie Feast: Master Chef -10 [1751]

Faerie Feast: The Secret Ingredient is Love -5 [1746]

Alluring Whisper -20 [1726]

Alluring Whisper: Siren’s Song -80 [1646]

Alluring Whisper: Dirty Minds -20 [1626]

Sticky Fingers: Alter-Flavor[dlc] -10 [1616]

Other Controls

Command Seals x2 -5 [1611]

Command Seals: General Seals -10 [1601]

Home Perks

Pocket Space -5 [1596]

Pocket Apartment -20 [1576]

All Roads Lead to Home -10 [1566]

Sweet Home -10 [1556]

Grand Manor -20 [1536]

Life's A Beach -10 [1526]

Talents

Performance Talent free [1526]

Everlasting Talent free [1526]

Body Talent free [1526]

Martial Talent free [1526]

Wild Talent free [1526]

Soul Talent free [1526]

Communication Talent -10 [1516]

Blessed Talent -30 [1486]

Psychic Talent -20 [1466]

Covert Talent -10 [1456]

Aesthetic Talent -10 [1446]

Inexhaustible -140 [1306]

Educational Talent[dlc] -5 [1301]

Added Potential x20 [Mikael has Aura, Haki, Nico Robin has Aura, Senju Tsunade has Aura, Haki, Shihouin Yoruichi has Aura, Haki, Scáthach has Aura, Haki, Artoria Pendragon (Lancer) has Aura, Haki, Wonder Woman has Aura, Haki, Medea has Aura, Haki, Emma Frost has Aura, Haki, Raven has Aura, Haki, Glynda Goodwitch has Haki] -100 [1201]

Talent Sharing x3 [Martial Talent, Soul Talent, Educational Talent] -30 [1171]

Defences

Body Defense x2 free [1171]

Wild Defense x2 free [1171]

Environmental Defense x2 free [1171]

Stress Defense x2 free [1171]

Destiny Defense x2 free [1171]

Mind Defense x2 -25 [1146]

Polymorph Defense x2 free [1146]

Wyldscape Defense x2 free [1146]

Fatality Defense x2 free [1146]

Corruption Defense x2 -50 [1096]

Possession Defense x2 -20 [1076]

Information Defense x2 -50 [1026]

Soul Defense x2 -50 [976]

Trace Defense x2 -100 [876]

Paradox Defense x2 -100 [776]

Addiction Defense x2 -20 [756]

Defences discounted for retinue members +204 [960]

Misc Perks

Warranty Plan -200 [760]

Sexual Calibration -2 [758]

Fertility Calibration I -2 [756]

Time-Savers[dlc] -2 [754]

Generic Waifu Perks

Grail Knowledge[dlc] x4 [Nico Robin, Scáthach, Medea, Artoria Pendragon (Lancer)] -4 [750]

Companions bought -750 [0]

Nico Robin(T5)[buy] from One Piece

Senju Tsunade(T6)[buy] from Naruto

Shihouin Yoruichi(T7)[buy] from Bleach

Scáthach(T8)[buy] from Nasuverse

Artoria Pendragon (Lancer)(T8)[buy] from Nasuverse

Medea(T7)[buy] from Nasuverse

Wonder Woman(T9)[buy] from DC (magic side)

Emma Frost(T8)[buy] from Marvel

Raven(T8)[buy] from DC (magic side)

Glynda Goodwitch(T6)[buy] from RWBY

BUILD (TRUE)

Starting World: Soulsborne

Starting budget 1545

Patron

DEATH free [1545]

Intensity

Me and My Girlfriend(s)(PvE) +0 [1545]

Black-mark +1236 [2781]

Dropped-In -0 [2781]

Heritage

Dragon Heart -80 [2701]

Dragon Scale[Freedom] -95 [2606]

Dragon Aura -200 [2406]

Dragon Thrall -150 [2256]

Dragon Blood -150 [2106]

Treasure Hoard -20 [2086]

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Sticky Fingers: Brown Sugar -15 [1761]

Faerie Feast: Master Chef -10 [1751]

Faerie Feast: The Secret Ingredient is Love -5 [1746]

Alluring Whisper -20 [1726]

Alluring Whisper: Siren's Song -80 [1646]

Alluring Whisper: Dirty Minds -20 [1626]

Sticky Fingers: Alter-Flavor[dlc] -10 [1616]

Don't Stand So Close to Me -15 [1601]

Stud Service[dlc] -10 [1591]

Other Controls

Command Seals x2 -5 [1586]
Command Seals: General Seals -10 [1576]
Home Perks
Pocket Space -5 [1571]
Pocket Apartment -20 [1551]
All Roads Lead to Home -10 [1541]
Sweet Home -10 [1531]
Grand Manor -20 [1511]
Life's A Beach -10 [1501]
Warehouse District -20 [1481]
Creature Feature I[dlc] -500 [981]
Stay in touch[dlc] -5 [976]
Demiplane -15 [961]
Home Security[dlc] free [961]
Sweet Home Expansion x13 -650 [311]
Talents
Performance Talent free [311]
Everlasting Talent free [311]
Body Talent free [311]
Martial Talent free [311]
Wild Talent free [311]
Soul Talent free [311]
Communication Talent -10 [301]
Blessed Talent -30 [271]
Psychic Talent -20 [251]
Covert Talent -10 [241]
Inexhaustible -140 [101]
Educational Talent[dlc] -5 [96]
Added Potential x20 [Mikael has Aura, Haki, Nico Robin has Aura, Senju Tsunade has Aura, Haki, Shihouin Yoruichi has Aura, Haki, Scáthach has Aura, Haki, Artoria Pendragon (Lancer) has Aura, Haki, Wonder Woman has Aura, Haki, Medea has Aura, Haki, Emma Frost has Aura, Haki, Raven has Aura, Haki, Glynda Goodwitch has Haki] -100 [-4]
Talent Sharing x6 [Martial Talent, Soul Talent, Educational Talent, Blessed Talent, Psychic Talent, Performance Talent] -60 [-64]
Science Talent -20 [-84]
Engineering Talent -30 [-114]

Presence[dlc] -30 [-144]
Inculcation Talent[dlc] -10 [-154]
Money Talent[dlc] -10 [-164]
Aesthetic Talent -10 [-174]
Defenses
Body Defense x2 free [-174]
Wild Defense x2 free [-174]
Environmental Defense x2 free [-174]
Stress Defense x2 free [-174]
Destiny Defense x2 free [-174]
Mind Defense x2 -25 [-199]
Polymorph Defense x2 free [-199]
Wyldscape Defense x2 free [-199]
Fatality Defense x2 free [-199]
Corruption Defense x2 -50 [-249]
Possession Defense x2 -20 [-269]
Information Defense x2 -50 [-319]
Soul Defense x2 -50 [-369]
Trace Defense x2 -100 [-469]
Paradox Defense x2 -100 [-569]
Addiction Defense x2 -20 [-589]
Defenses discounted for retinue members +204 [-385]
Misc Perks
Warranty Plan -200 [-585]
Sexual Calibration -2 [-587]
Fertility Calibration I -2 [-589]
Time-Savers[dlc] -2 [-591]
Memorabilia[dlc] x3 -15 [-606]
Trajectory. Agreement.[dlc] -200 [-806]
Patron Income[dlc] -1000 [-1806]
Designer Babies[dlc] x2 -16 [-1822]
Generic Waifu Perks
Grail Knowledge[dlc] x5 [Nico Robin, Scáthach, Medea, Artoria Pendragon (Lancer), Senju Tsunade] -5 [-1827]
Anthropize[dlc] x5 [You, Nico Robin, Senju Tsunade, Shihouin Yoruichi, Scáthach] -50 [-1877]

Paper Trail x6 [You, Emma Frost, Nico Robin, Wonder Woman, Glynda Goodwitch, Raven] -6 [-1883]
Companions bought -750 [-2633]
Nico Robin(T5)[buy] from One Piece
Senju Tsunade(T6)[buy] from Naruto
Shihouin Yoruichi(T7)[buy] from Bleach
Scáthach(T8)[buy] from Nasuverse
Artoria Pendragon (Lancer)(T8)[buy] from Nasuverse
Medea(T7)[buy] from Nasuverse
Wonder Woman(T9)[buy] from DC (magic side)
Emma Frost(T8)[buy] from Marvel
Raven(T8)[buy] from DC (magic side)
Glynda Goodwitch(T6)[buy] from RWBY
Specific credit modifiers +2633 [0]:

Patron Wage [+2733]
Avalon [-100]
Here is a link: https://waifu-catalog.neocities.org/

Omake

OMAKE : IF VOLUME 1 HAD AN ANIME ENDING

Opens on a tiny white dragon floating alone in the darkness of space.

Google: FF14 Scream

Foul child, bastard and beast

O lost lamb, first to the feast

Image changes to a brief flash of Mikael in the Cell before blurring through various places in Dark Souls/Bloodborne/Elden Ring.

Dozens of vistas flash in a few seconds.

Come claim if you're able

A spot at this table

Flashing images settle on a picture of all 10 original women sitting at the dining table at the Mansion, all of them eyeing each other warily.

Mild and meek, down on your knees

For hide and seek. It's time that we feed

Scenes of Mikael dying to various bosses in Dark Souls 1.

Your heart is racing, blood is running cold

Your fractured will is whispering (fly away, fly away)

Far Away

Back on the Island.

The women are exploring and turn to look skyward.

Here be lions

Still image of Ornstein and Smough

Say goodnight

With each bite does your sanity die

Mikael battles Smough, Ornstein impales him from behind.

Sucking the life out, letting the dark

Inside

Diana watches Mikael walk away, concern in her eyes.

She says something, and Mikael stumbles.

Say a prayer as the light leaves your eyes

Or scream all you like, your gods can't hear you

Upon a field of ash, Mikael stands against the hollow Lord of Cinders, Gwyn.

Scream

Now Scream

Scream

Pseudo suicide, don't choke on your pride

They battle in a clash of blades over the remnants of a fading flame.

Scream

Now scream

Now. Scream.

Yeah, I'm gonna watch you bleed

Fires of the First Flame consume Mikael.

His mouth opens in a silent scream of agony.

Flensed and flayed, how does it feel?

Your pound is paid, those scars will not heal, no

Tsunade tries to hold his hollow head in her lap, crying over him.

In Belfry Luna, Medea mouths three words to him.

Though she is smiling, her eyes are wet with unshed tears.

Lost in suffering, drowning in your tears

Won't someone, somewhere tell me (where do I, where do I)

Go from here

Better armed, more skilled, and more determined, Mikael journeys through Dark Souls 2, making easy work of the various bosses.

Be the lion

Mikael stands before the Throne of Want.

Scene shifts to Mikael wandering the world outside the games.

Say goodnight

With each bite does your sanity die

Mikael is enclosed within the Throne of Want.

Sucking the life out, letting the dark

Inside

Robin offers Mikael a hand.

He reaches out but passes through.

He stares blankly at his empty hand.

Say a prayer as the light leaves your eyes

Or scream all you like, the gods can't hear you

Mikael remains fixed on the screen, walking toward the camera.

He remains unmoved even as the backdrop changes around him.

Dressed in rage

Inside my cage

The screen splits as if cut by a blade.

Half is the broken man in the cell.

Half is the warrior of a million battles.

My pandemonium

Still bound to the flame that I bear

The warrior, Mikael, stands before the Soul of Cinder.

His face is blank and unemotional.

Buried alive

In the coffin of who I used to be

I'll scream all I like, 'cause we're all mad here

Mikael stands upon a stone precipice in a storm, gazing up at the golden leaves of the Erd Tree.

Vague shadows of women try to reach out to him, desperately trying to hold him.

He doesn't notice.

The ground caves under him.

He falls.

(Slumbering, tumbling)

(Wandering, wondering)

(Suffering, hungering)

Falling end over end, Mikael falls through the darkness. He seems to shrink as he does.

Forever falling into my mind

Deeper, deeper down 'til I

Four pale blue arms reach out from the dark to try and catch him, but he falls between the fingers.

Say goodnight

To the shadow I left far behind

Still frames once more.

Godrick, Rennala, Morgott, Mohg, Rykard, and Godfrey.

I'm just a stranger, we are all strange

Inside

Mikael charges alone at Dragonlord Placidusax, Moonlight Greatsword in hand.

You can run but there's nowhere to hide

So scream all you like, no one can hear us

Mikael's final, acrobatic attack upon Radahn.

Moonveil plunges down upon the Starscourge, and the stars fall from the heavens behind him.

Follow me (Follow me)

Come follow me (Follow me)

Upon Torrent's back, Mikael and Melina ride through Limgrave, Caelid, and Liurnia until they reach the foot of the Erdtree and Leyndell.

To Pandemonium

Still bound to the flame that I bear (There's)

Melina is engulfed in flame.

Mikael watches helplessly on his knees as the fire forms into Malenia.

Her prosthetic blade flashes out at him.

He doesn't move.

The screen goes black.

No release (Rescue me)

From this empty, waking wonderland (Rescue me)

So scream if you like, 'cause we're all mad here

Mikael flies through space toward a massive White Dragon.

His arm is outstretched to it.

His face is lit with joy.

Inches from it, he stops.

His eyes widen as he is yanked backwards.

Scream all you like, 'cause we're all mad here

The White Dragon Awakes.

It roars in triumph.

Author's Note:

This surprise Omake is brought to you by the 3 hours of sleep I've had in the last 2 days and my third Monster Energy drink… or my fourth, I can't remember.
Anyway, I'm sure I'll regret this when I have had some sleep, but my friend was helping me with moving, and we were shooting the shit. He asked me; If Volume 1 of RR had an anime opening, what would it be?
Thus this abomination.
I went full EDGE on it since Volume 1 is where the character is at his lowest point. I had been listening to the FF14 Ost while working, so I wanted to use one. There was another song I wanted to use, but that one was a total spoiler, so I decided not to. 'Scream' is a fantastic song but not crucial to the story, so I went with it.
…I'm going to lie down now.

Volume 2

Emancipation

EMANCIPATION I

Oh violence does call me, I've answered before
I'd made many enemies, I'd settled my scores
But I did grow weary and I settled down
And proudly bore the weight of my crown
I lived on my lonesome away in the far
Where there was no violence to trouble my heart
I'd hung up my sword and I'd raised up my hoe
And I lied as I said that I ne'er would go

Dragons Day.

The day the world changed.

There were many names for the event.

Some called it the 'Moonrise'.

Others called it 'The Impact'.

A few people, possibly inebriated due to celebrations, called it 'the Nom heard around the world'.

It would come to be known as Dragons Day in textbooks.

The name stemmed from the initial name given to the holiday celebrating the death of the Simurgh in a small town near Madison, Wisconsin; 'Dragon Day'.

The internet, being the cesspit it is, would make enough jokes about 'D-day' and 'Double Ds' that the term would stick around and, after a few adaptations, would become the official name for the event.

It also went to show what the ordinary people thought was the most important part of the whole event.

Though historians could look back and see the whole picture and know that the death of the Simurgh was the first, and possibly least, of many events to shape the world, the day-to-day citizenry did not see it that way.

A massive new Island in the Atlantic causing delays to shipping? Most people barely noticed the minuscule increase in price for certain goods.

A glowing blue moon in the sky? It's not doing anything. Why should I care?

The world's greatest heroes failed to stop a titanic dragon from landing on earth? Nothing terrible has happened yet.

Realistically, people were jaded at that point. They were used to significant events, so something that didn't seem to affect them too much, even if it looked impressive, was quickly put out of mind.

Nobody had died, and no one was worse for wear, so most did not care about the new draconic alien. Someone else would deal with it if it turned out to be malignant.

No, the most important event of the Dragons' Descent was 'the Nom heard around the world'.

One cannot underestimate how much of an impact the Endbringers had on the world.

When Behemoth first appeared six years ago, it destroyed the Ghawar Oil Field. Standing nearly 50 feet tall, the dynakinetic laid waste to a vast swath of land.

As this was the first attack, the devastation was total as heroes rushed to stop the beast. Its ability to manipulate radiation, even imitating kryptonite and the 50-foot kill zone surrounding it, caused countless casualties to the heroes who arrived to help. Though Ghawar wasn't a significant population center, thousands still died. Even today, an area of over 10,000 square kilometres were uninhabitable.

Though the monster was eventually repelled, with numerous casualties, the world instantly faced an energy crisis.

In the following months, this was mitigated by innovations from geniuses like Reed Richards and Tony Stark or companies like LexCorp or Wayne Industries. Some argued that they were only doing it for the profit they could make with their more fuel-efficient engines or alternative energy source.

Most were just happy that gas prices weren't insane.

The world slowly recovered from the attack, and most moved on with their lives, thinking it was only another random rampage from some villain or another.

Then, three months later, Behemoth attacked again.

This time he appeared in Singapore.

The good news was that the heroes, now more familiar with the monster's abilities, faced fewer casualties before driving it off.

The bad news was the other death toll.

Millions of dead, either in the initial attack or in the aftermath.

The single greatest loss of human life in one day in the history of the world.

That day saw the first use of the term Endbringer. Not only because of the sheer destruction it brought but because nobody knew how to destroy the creature.

Physical attacks were worse than useless. Only the strongest blows had any material effect, and even then, the monster regenerated in moments.

Energy attacks were almost as bad.

While effective in the fight, magic hadn't been able to do any lasting damage as the creature regenerated no matter how much damage it took.

In the three years following its first appearance, Behemoth would attack every three

months, targeting either population centers or essential infrastructure. The world came to expect and prepare for it, trying all sorts of ideas.

Nothing lasted.

When thrown off the planet, sealed, teleported, or banished, they reappeared in an unguarded location less than a minute later.

The only consolation the world had was that the average death toll dropped from hundreds to tens of thousands.

Then Leviathan attacked Oslo.

Not only did this signal to the world that Behemoth wasn't unique, but it also marked a shift back to the death toll of the early battles. Millions more died as the ocean flooded the city. The new Endbringer was easier to fight, lacking the kill zone, but it was also much more mobile.

Evacuation in time was almost impossible.

The following two years saw the two monsters shift back and forth every three months.

Then the Simurgh descended upon Dheli.

If Leviathan and Behemoth were treated with fear and caution, natural disasters that people would weather and then rebuild, the Simurgh told everyone that nothing was safe.

In the year and a half she was active, Ziz only attacked three cities.

Every time, the death toll was less than its 'siblings'.

You had a better chance of surviving if Ziz descended on you than if the other two appeared.

If asked which Endbringer you'd rather show up on your doorstep, everyone on earth would answer the same thing.

'Any of them but the Simurgh.'

If Behemoth was a bomb and Leviathan a tsunami, Ziz was a scalpel. One wielded by an incredibly skilled and sadistic hand.

She was the smallest of the Endbringers. Her weakness to magic was more pronounced than any other since she couldn't even perceive it. Her most prolonged battle lasted less than thirty minutes.

After her descent into Dheli, she was given the designation Simurgh or Ziz.

After Maddison, she was given a more fitting name.

Hopekiller.

When she fell upon Star City, only a select few could fight her without going mad from her influence.

Of those numbers, none included anyone with a Tinker rating or Psychic ability.

Absolutely nobody wanted a repeat of Psylock or Mister Terrific.

The Simurgh solidified the message that, given enough time, the Endbringers would be the world's doom.

She turned the world's best and brightest, heroes many admired against those they once protected.

Some overtly, some subtly.

The constant, repeated blows against humanity led to increased crime, nihilism, and suicides. A psychological term was used to describe the feeling of hopelessness that filled most people.

The Endbringer Effect.

So, when the White Dragon arrived on earth and swallowed the Hopekiller whole, most did not feel fear of the new beast.

Only all-consuming joy.

It would later be called the 'First Miracle'.

It gave hope to the hopeless world.

More than one nation declared a national holiday after learning of Simurgh's disappearance.

India began building a statue of the White Dragon within two days. The revelry that followed D-day would become the stuff of legends. Mardi Gras, Oktoberfest, and Holi looked like church congregations in comparison. Nine months later, births would triple their average. Twice as much as the baby boom.

In the days after D-day, those who weren't hungover and were near the ocean would discover the 'Second Miracle'.

It was subtle, so much so that nobody could pinpoint exactly when it happened, but the first signs were when bodies floated to the surface in harbours worldwide.

Not just the recently dead, but others that looked decades old. Some looked drowned, but most bore wounds indicating a more violent death. They were naked of all man-made objects. Gotham Harbor, in particular, looked like a sea of corpses. It was such an odd thing to happen in all parts of the world that nobody quite knew what was happening.

Then someone posted a video online.

It was a simple thing, ten seconds long.

Someone, likely female, judging by the wrist shape, dropped a soda can in the ocean.

It dissolved instantly as if dipped in the most potent acid in the world.

People caught on quickly after that.

No matter what material it was, anything man-made that wasn't biodegradable melted into the ocean if it wasn't attached to someone. Swimsuits kept their form, but if you

accidentally dropped your phone in the water, it was gone forever.

The bodies floating to the surface were those buried illegally at sea. As the cement blocks or other anchors dissolved, proof of the crimes finally saw the light of day. More than one cold case would be reopened, and criminals caught as a result of new evidence.

For the first time ever, the ocean was trash free.

Boats still sailed, and ocean mining continued uninterrupted, but nothing detrimental to the seas remained in its waters for longer than a second. Oil spills vanished as they happened. Shipwrecks were never found again. Some complained about the loss of treasure or historical artifacts, but most were happy that the Pacific trash vortex was no longer a thing.

It should not come as a surprise that after eating the Hopekiller and cleaning the oceans, cults to worship the Dragon started to spring up around the world.

And then the pilgrimages began.

Early on, it was those who possessed their own ships or yachts. Those brave enough or stupid to approach the White Dragon set out to try and reach the new Island.

Already people were throwing around names like Atlantis, Mu, and El Dorado.

Some even called it the New Eden.

So, when they approached the White Mountains that surrounded the new subcontinent, ready to pass between them, most were surprised when they were blocked from progressing. They could touch the white scales of the Dragon but not advance an inch further.

No boats crashed. They simply sailed on for eternity, never moving forward, even as their engines propelled them until they turned away.

Those more knowledgeable knew something similar happened to the heroes who tried to follow the White Dragon when it landed. They found themselves unable to progress past a certain point, no matter how fast they flew or ran. Teleportation did not work either. Nobody was able to approach the Island.

Reviewing the footage taken on D-day, the heroes would realize that the boundary matched that of the great Jewel the Dragon carried.

For weeks, pilgrims made their way to touch the White Mountains. To feel the scales of the creature who had been the first to slay an Endbringer for the first time. More than a few tried to grab ‘samples’ with no luck.

Very occasionally, the spikes would move. Sometimes in a twitch, sometimes in a shiver. No water was displaced, and nobody was harmed. For all intents and purposes, the White Mountains of the Dragon acted as an invisible wall separating the rest of the world from the Island.

Two weeks after D-day, there was the first documented case of a ship passing through the White Mountains. Like a mirage, they sailed on as if the spikes were not there.

It happened in the dead of night, far from most other vessels. The only reason people discovered the occurrence was a drone flying around to capture more complete footage of the White Mountains in the moonlight. It captured footage of the small vessel passing through the scales as if they were a mirage.

The ship was never seen again.

In the morning, the drone operator would try and replicate the feat but would find herself in the same perpetual loop of advancing as everywhere else.

Investigations would reveal that the boat 'the Evangelist' belonged to one Robert Mathers. It jettisoned from Kennebunkport in Maine with a half dozen passengers. All with connections to the Fallen, the Endbringer cultists.

It was the first but not the last vessel that would pass through the White Mountains.

They all vanished.

Naturally, people started assigning moral judgments to these different results.

The news got around about the 'Test of Faith'.

If you could lay your hands upon the White Dragon, you were deemed 'pure'.

Should you pass through the White Mountains, you were 'judged'.

It should be noted that, so long as one did not keep sailing past the scales, they could turn back no worse for wear. Only those who attempted to reach the Island were lost forever.

As 'pilgrimages' began, floating meeting grounds started to spring up. Barges, floating restaurants, yachts, and other entertainment ships congregated together. Since the Island was in international waters, nobody had jurisdiction over those who started to live part-time near the great beast.

There was some fear that Leviathan would disrupt the floating towns, but many felt more secure in the shadows of the White Mountains than anywhere else.

They believed that the Dragon would defend them.

Businesses dedicated to bringing food or commodities to the burgeoning villages started to boom. Tourism, in particular, saw the birth of many small businesses.

This was all aided by the flowering marine life.

Dolphins, whales, sharks, and other fish seemed to flow into the area. They multiplied and spread out, irrespective of their common mating grounds. It was a veritable ocean renaissance, as the population of certain species multiplied to levels not seen since the advent of fishing itself.

Wildlife tours, scuba diving, studies of marine biology, and other ocean-based

attractions drew people in like moths to the flame.

One day, a video was posted online.

‘An average day at White Waters.’

It was an advertisement for a floating restaurant in White Waters, a floating town around the northwest side of the White Mountains. It was a common stop for those coming from Nova Scotia or the New England states.

The video was only two minutes long. It depicted images of swimming with sharks, an enormous pod of dolphins breaching the surface, fishing a six-meter tuna and grilling it, and finishing the day eating on the patio barge of the restaurant.

In the last frame, as the video faded to black, one marine archeologist noticed an odd shadow in the water that sparked his curiosity. Comparing other footage of the area and reports from various diver’s accounts, he came to a shocking conclusion.

Gathering what funds he could, the man set out to White Waters.

He stayed for a week, searching for proof of his hypothesis.

On the eighth day, he found his holy grail.

His drone captured footage of a seventy-foot-long carcass, a blue whale, being ripped apart by two sharks. Both of the carnivorous fish were over fifty feet long.

Some way, somehow, megalodons had returned to the ocean.

This discovery was made three months after D-day.

By then, most of the world had gotten used to the new status quo. The Blue Moon, the Island, and the White Dragon were old news. Many more shocking events had happened since.

The Dragon didn’t seem to do much, after all.

While the discovery of extinct animals returning did surprise and scare some people, most were living in fear of being the next Endbringer attack target.

They were right to do so, though for the wrong reasons.

The Fourth Miracle was a prelude to a reshaping of the world stage.

But that story is for a later time.

To understand everything, we must step a bit backwards.

Back to the Island, two weeks after D-day.

It’s amazing how one night, and one family conversation, can set dominoes into motion to change the world.

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“Gah!” I cried in more surprise than pain. “Medea!” I shouted as I rubbed the bruised

tentacle. It didn't hurt, even if there was a chunk missing.

I wasn't even sure I had nerves anymore.

"Horray!" Priscilla cried with a fist pump. FATALITY flashed across the screen as she took the chance to decapitate my character

"Mrow," Medea, my cat, flapped her tiny wings ineffectually. Despite her newfound race change, courtesy of the third level of Memorabilia, she was still a cat at heart.

To her, my tiny squid-like form looked delicious.

It probably didn't help that I had already boosted her Tier thanks to Dragon Blood. Nor that I had long ago made my body fluids delicious for the women of the Island.

She didn't look any different than she used to. A larger-than-normal American Wirehair with a resting 'I don't care' face. One would think she was an ordinary cat if it wasn't for the draconic wings.

Thankfully the Floof only had time to take one bite out of me before being captured by Glynda's telekinesis. It healed right away, but the shock cost me the match.

No significant loss, as I was terrible at fighting games anyway.

"I still do not know if I should be flattered or insulted you named your cat after me," Medea, the witch, said. She didn't look up from her delicate wirework.

"Flattered," I answered immediately. "Not only was 'Medea' my favourite play, but she is Best Floof. Isn't that right, you tub of lard. Whose the flooffiest floof? You are, you are." I cooed at the cat, still mewling in protest at her captivity.

"She just ate one of your legs," Glynda put her book down to arch an eyebrow at me, still maintaining control over the squirming winged feline. "This isn't even the first time."

"Tentacles," I corrected as I used my tiny draconic wings to fly from my position on Priscilla's lap and bury my face in Medea's fur. She tried to nibble on my head. "I still can't get them to combine yet without them turning digitigrade, and don't get me started on making a skeletal structure. Biology is the worst. Give me physics or chemistry any day of the week. Anyway, it is not Medea's fault I am delicious."

I felt a poke in my back.

Turning, I saw a fluffy tail prodding me, even as Priscilla started a new game. She resolutely looked away from me and her appendage. I would have smirked if I had lips, but instead, I just curved my mouth into the closest approximation.

Taking the hint, I stopped rubbing the floofy cat and started on the floofy dragon.

The five of us, six if you included Medea (cat), were in one of the large living rooms of the mansion. Glynda was reading some books from the library.

I could guess its content from the occasional blushes and furtive glances she sent me. That and the picture on the front, a blonde woman with her blouse torn open and held in

the arms of a muscular dark-haired man, didn't leave much to the imagination.

Caster was working on a side project I had asked her to make. It was simple, so she didn't need to be in her workshop and had set herself up at a nearby table. She seemed to be enjoying the reprieve from another fruitless attempt at creating a homunculus that could act as a vessel for me.

One can only watch their hard work turn to mush so many times before feeling frustrated.

I had been sitting on Priscilla's lap while we played some games together. I was terrible at anything multiplayer-related, but the dragon girl found a fondness for digital competition that she didn't hold for the physical act of violence. A few other women knew the basics of video games, but none found it more enjoyable than other hobbies, so I was the only one who could give her any challenge.

Depending on how tonight went, I was prepared to unleash her upon the internet tomorrow. My poor tentacles needed a break from button mashing. If I got T-bagged one more time, I would throw something.

"I'm heading out to fly," I said after paying the appropriate tribute to the Floof. Standing up, the tail tried to wrap itself around my body, but I slipped away to the floor. Looking up at the three women thrice my size, I asked, "Any of you want to join me?"

"I believe I shall remain," Glynda said, though she took the time to rub her hand through my 'hair'.

I wasn't particularly surprised. The huntress was one of a few who did not enjoy being in dragon form. Apparently, it reminded her of certain Grimm too much for her comfort.

"I want to finish this tonight," Medea said, not looking at me.

"You don't have to," I said, laying my 'hand' upon her knee. I took a small sadistic joy in seeing her blush to the tips of her ears and her hands' shiver. "I'm in no rush."

Apparently, my tiny form was so adorable to the women of the Island that, when I had mentioned possibly increasing my size, they had flipped the fuck out. All thirteen had staged a full intervention and begged me to stay smol until I could turn into human form.

I had been so amused that I had agreed.

My shapeshifting was incredibly limited. I needed to micromanage what I wanted to change to an almost insane degree. Changing size was manageable. Building a functioning skeletal structure or functioning organs was way more challenging. I had spent hours with Tsunade as she tried to pound medical knowledge into my head. I had already known more than the basics, so everything else was just a process of memorization of certain parts, their locations and function.

I hadn't liked biology in school, and I didn't now.

Unless we were being euphemistic, of course.

Medea, Robin, Priscilla and Yoruichi were so enamoured with this squid-child form that whenever they looked at me, I found myself squid-napped into their bosom as they demanded cuddles.

I didn't complain because a) boobs, b) it made them happy, and c) I wanted cuddles too, damn it!

"N-no," She said, struggling to keep her eyes turned away. "The sooner I finish, the sooner we can go on that date."

"It's not really a date," I pointed out as I backed off. The key to being a bulli instead of a bully is to give people space when they need it. "I'll take you on plenty of dates once I have a human form again, but this is more like a business trip."

"I know," she pouted, and, had I been human, I would have pounced on those lips. She was too cute. "I still want to go out tomorrow."

"Sure," I said. Turning to Priscilla, furiously mashing buttons on her controller, I asked again. "You want to come?"

"Nay," the halfbreed didn't look at me as she shook her head. "The vile Kronika hath bested me too many times. I shall have justice!"

"Just the two of us then." I looked at Glynda and nodded for her to release Medea.

The cat flew at me again, though now she rubbed affectionately against my side instead of munching on my appendages. I led her through the mansion and out the front door.

The feline took off into the sky no sooner had we passed the threshold.

She was met quickly by four large red drakes. Each was about the size of a large house and, having imbibed my blood during their nine months of life on the Island, were all Tier 7.

Somehow, my recently turned Tier 4 housecat with wings had managed to pressgang all four of them into following her lead. Now they roamed the Island like a gang of thugs, getting into mischief whenever they wanted.

The pet mafia was a force to be reckoned with.

Yesterday I saw them herding a couple of Maneater Boars into a group of Scourge Beasts and eating the remains.

The day before, I had flown over the scene of Medea riding a Spirit Jellyfish into battle, the drakes at her back against a gathering of Land Octopi.

I wasn't worried about their safety.

It had been easy to have Medea (witch) cast the same spells onto Medea (cat) that she had devised for Hengeron II, Llamrei II, Andromeda and Cassandra when they were young

and vulnerable.

Whether it was the Wolves of Radagon, Rune Bears, other Drakes, the Hydras or the vile creatures of Bloodborne. None of them would be able to get past Caster's spells.

Content in the knowledge that the pets were safe, I transformed.

As mentioned, my shapeshifting was incredibly limited. I essentially had two forms I could 'default' to.

The first was the form of my Avatar. Its basic look was a grotesque pile of blood, tentacles, blades, and teeth. As a Great Old One, I didn't mind the extra appendages or its Lovecraftian aesthetic. Nevertheless, I had put considerable effort into turning it into something that wouldn't melt people's eyeballs when looking at it.

As Robin put it, the result could be best described: 'Adorably Eldritch.'

My other 'default' was the nature of my Body.

I shifted from tiny Cthulu to a slightly less tiny dragon. I wasn't bigger than a large dog and only had one pair of wings instead of three, but otherwise, I was a perfect reflection of my actual form.

I took to the air with a whoop of joy, my wings catching a warm-up draft as the evening sun painted the sky a beautiful crimson.

Even after two weeks, flying remained everything I had imagined. The rush of air, the vertigo sensation, the world's view shrinking below me.

It was the best feeling in the world.

Despite what many people would say after meeting me, I was, at my core, a hardcore introvert.

Spending too much time with people drained me of energy. I had learned to fake charisma during my life as that was the only way to be successful in a professional environment. Most people thought of me as an extrovert, the women of the Island included, but what they didn't see were the days and weeks when I was alone.

The question was whether I had the option of companions or not. It was the difference between loneliness and self-isolation.

Melina was much the same. We sometimes went weeks without saying a word to each other during our time together. She would remain in spirit form while I travelled the countryside.

Even people I liked and whose presence I enjoyed slowly wore me down. I recharged by spending long periods alone, letting me organize my thoughts as I unwound. Playing games, reading, or listening to music were my preferred isolation methods before the Cell.

Now, flying dominated my 'me time'.

Even when others accompanied me on my daily flights, we never talked while flying.

The only sound was the wind beneath our wings or the cry of the occasional bird.

It was almost sacred.

The only thing better than being alone for an introvert was when a group of introverts wanted to be alone together.

As I looked at my Shadow cast upon the clouds, I knew I wasn't genuinely alone, but if anyone sympathized with my need for quiet, it was her.

We flew like that for hours. The sun setting upon the sea turned it into an ocean of oranges, reds and yellows.

When night fell, we were lit by the pale crescent of the moon, the blue glow of Ranni's Dark Moon, and the stars twinkling above.

As my thoughts lazily turned with every wingbeat, they inevitably fell upon the nature of this world.

'My calculations place you reaching your peak state at an interesting time.'

That had been what Death told me in that fateful meeting room.

Interesting times indeed.

I hadn't been shocked when I saw a gathering of heroes I recognized from DC and Marvel. Death had explicitly turned into those two versions of herself. Only one hero remained unknown to me, the one in green, but I had thought it could be a version of Dr. Doom I was unaware of. I didn't have an encyclopedic knowledge of comics after all.

I was a bit surprised to not find anything from the Evil Ernie storyline, but I was keeping my eyes open.

I wasn't surprised to find the gathering of heroes trying to stop me from coming to earth. If I found out a fuck-off dragon the size of a large country was coming to my planet, I would also want to stop it. Since I wouldn't hurt them, and they couldn't hurt me while I was Free of Real Space, I figured it was better to ask forgiveness than permission when it came to becoming an illegal alien.

I had hoped having one of Ranni's dolls acting as a traffic cop would keep anybody out of my way. From what she told me, they thought I was a 'Lord of Chaos', so negotiants broke down. Don't know why they would think that, but there had been no permanent damage, so no-harm-no-foul.

When I had seen them all fighting, I had a moment of contemplation where I tried to decide if ramming into them at lightspeed, probably killing more than a few, would be worth it. Ultimately, I decided against it as I wasn't the type to kill people for slight inconveniences.

I wasn't in the Soulsborne games anymore.

I didn't need to kill anything that got in my way. While I wasn't at the top of the food

chain, even at Tier 10, I was still pretty high up. With strength came the ability to be magnanimous.

I could talk to them later once I was on the planet.

Then I saw the angel-like woman in orbit around Earth.

Unlike Eidolon, whose costume was bland, the Simurgh was immediately recognizable.

So I ate her.

There was more to it than that. I essentially had to isolate her into 'myself', bind her with my 'bite' and simultaneously Command her to shatter her own core.

I didn't feel too bad about telling someone to kill themselves with a Command Seal because;

A) It took four seals to do it.

B) To me, commanding someone to kill themselves was greater mercy than mind control.

And C) It was fucking Ziz!

If it had been in any other situation, she would have been worth a fuck-ton of points, but points were useless to me. I had no way of enforcing obedience or loyalty that couldn't be resisted, so I decided to gobble her up.

I doubted it would work with any other Endbringer since they weren't blind to the present like she was. With my Defences, she could not perceive me in the slightest.

Besides, with the firepower my group could conjure up, we could kill pretty much any of the others once we knew where their core was. The only question was why, with all the powerful heroes around, were Endbringers still a thing.

Power levels varied wildly in comics, from author to author.

Superman, at his peak, could tow planets behind him on a chain or fly through dimensions, but in some stories, he has trouble with meteors the size of a house.

Hulk could either destroy planets or be beaten by regular gorillas.

Flash could outrun death or not make it home in time for dinner.

Based on my research over the last week, I wouldn't put any character at their peak comic strength, but I could think of a half dozen that could kill the Enbringers at their current level.

The monsters weren't sandbagging as hard as in the web novel, but they were still inherently limited. Both by their desire to spread conflict without wiping out the host species and their lack of knowledge in dealing with magic.

You could see it sometimes in footage of their attacks. They hesitated when dealing with magical effects or powers. They could deal with Superman pretty evenly, even if they

were weaker because his powers came from his biology, but Shazam, powered by magic, tended to deal more damage.

So I turned my research to the Worm aspects of the world and realized immediately something was messed up.

Scion never existed.

The Endbringers were only active for six years.

Legend was the name of a small-time shapeshifting hero in Ohio with powers that turned him into a cryptid. Alexandria wasn't a hero name that showed up at all.

Case 53s was not a term I could find online.

It was the year 2018.

And when I investigated Brockton Bay, I found out what happened to New Wave.

If there was ever an example of crossover repercussions, it had been that.

No matter what else I found, Worm Canon was utterly fucked after that.

It also went to show that, despite the world being better in some ways compared to the web novel, only some things in this world were better off than Worm.

More heroes available, meaning a lack of a need for an Enbringer Truce? Heroes are the ones with the most significant casualties.

No sign of Cauldron? New Wave is killed in their homes.

I was almost tempted to move the Island when I realized that Metropolis, Gotham, New York, Washington DC, and Brockton Bay were so close together. You could drive from DC to BB in half a day.

These thoughts, and others, flittered through my mind as I carved my way across the sky.

That was the point of these moments of quiet. To organize my thoughts, calm down, and create plans for different eventualities.

I was interrupted in my musings after a few hours by Emma's voice in my head.

'Everyone is home', she told me. I do not know which continuity of Emma Frost she came from, but her psychic range was absurd. She could cover the hundreds of miles with little effort. 'We're just waiting for you two for dinner and the meeting.'

'Be right there,' I replied, turning my way southwestward. We had flown far enough north that I could see glaciers in the ocean. I put on more speed, and we were back to the southern point of the Island within ten minutes.

Seeing Dun Stallion and Torrent munching on some apples, I landed in the orchard to give the horses an affectionate pat before making my way up to the mansion, turning back into baby-squid form. I followed the giggles and shouts to the large dining room.

A round table covered in delicious-looking food and drinks was surrounded by a

dozen women.

Nobody was eating, but I didn't have to worry about the food getting cold, thanks to the magic of Fairy Feast. There were thirteen places around the table, only one of which was available.

"Mikael!" Yoruichi cried at seeing me. I braced myself, knowing what was coming. "Let me cuddle you!"

I froze.

Unable to move, I remained still as the shinigami dove for me and gathered me into her arms. I could not enjoy the soft press of her breasts as my main body, the titanic dragon shifted uncomfortably.

"Thieving cat!" Diana cried, taking offence to the fact Yoruichi had reached me first.

"You are free," my Shadow whispered in my ear.

Suddenly I could move again.

I slipped from her grasp to the floor with a hiss, my tentacles waiving with my agitation. Tiny fin-like blades covered my form. Even as I glared at the smirking death god, I was scooped up again.

"There, there," Artoria said softly, retaking her seat at the table and settling me on her lap. I leaned back into her own prodigious chest as I calmed my nerves.

Raven slipped from my shadow and took her seat at the table.

"I wish thee would not torture our Lord Husband so," Ranni said. She remained in her seat though I could see a set of arms twitch in my direction.

Beside her, Melina didn't say a word as she dissipated the dagger of light from her hand.

Both were the 'new girls' to the other women on the Island.

They did not have a year of comradery built up and were not as close friends as the others. Some twitching and instinctual reactions couldn't be helped. On the other hand, they had the most time spent with me, so there was some light jealousy on both sides.

I only hoped it would clear as both parties spent more time together.

"It's practice," Yoruichi said as she slipped back into her seat. She was utterly unrepentant.

"It's cruel," Medea disagreed, glaring at the dark-skinned woman. "I wouldn't have used Rule Breaker on you if I knew you would pull stunts like this. You don't know what it is like, trapped in your own body."

"I don't," the Shihouin nodded in agreement, her grin slipping as she looked serious for a moment. "I do know that Mikael was right. No matter what we do, we will eventually slip up and accidentally give him an order. I would rather he not freak out at a

critical moment."

"And you get to cuddle him," Tsunade pointed out.

"That too," Yoruichi smirked again.

"It is not right," Medea pressed, leaning forward to glare at the shinigami. She was the one most against this situation. Some remained neutral, and some were on the shinigami's side, but Medea remained steadfast in her opposition. "You should-"

"Enough!" I didn't shout the word nor make it a command, but it was said with enough gravitas that all talking stopped. Thirteen pairs of eyes swung to look at me in a moment of eerie synchronicity. I laid a hand-like tentacle upon Medea's thigh to calm her down. "As much as I don't like it, Yoruichi is right. We have an eternity together. I can't keep letting my fear and weakness rule me. It has cost me too much already." I couldn't look at Melina.

The fourteen of us had sat down together in those first few days to talk. I had explained almost everything, from my fears and their cost to the complete discussion I had held with Death and the Company Rep. I, having lived through it and watching the Island during the Dream, was the only one with the complete story.

As a show of trust and to prove I was trying to improve, I had asked Medea to use Rule Breaker on everyone. No longer bound, Yoruichi had immediately 'ordered' me to hug her.

That first time my Avatar moved on its own, I panicked so hard that my real body thrashed in the sea. If I wasn't immaterial, I would have caused enough disturbance in the ocean to sink dozens of coastal cities. I was freed almost immediately, but it had taken nearly an hour for me to calm down afterwards.

There had been a big argument then, and it remained a contentious topic.

The fact that I regained my cool so quickly showed that Yoruichi's 'training' was actually providing results. I still hated it, I always would, but now I was less likely to destroy my Avatar in a fit of panic.

I really didn't like the idea of starting over with shapeshifting from scratch.

"Feeling fear is no crime," Scathach nodded in approval at my words. She was the only one who actively participated in this form of 'training'. Though some others, like Diana, weren't against taking advantage of me when I was being 'Ordered' for snuggles. "It is in overcoming fear and improving that one becomes a warrior and a legend."

"You just want more time with him in the name of training." Robin pointed out with a smirk.

Scathach nodded with a subtle smile of her own.

"Besides," I softened my voice as I continued to coax the greek witch. "Since Raven

has apparently decided she lives in my shadow, I'll always have someone who can free me. My mind remains my own. They can only control my Avatar."

"Very well. So long as at least two of us are with you at all times." Relenting, the witch turned to look at Raven. "Can I trust you to ensure he doesn't get into too much trouble?"

The cambion, face void of all expression, simply nodded. I used to get some sense of Raven's emotions, but that had changed since she became a dragon of Shadow.

If some, like Glynda, did not like being in dragon form, Raven now stayed in that form as much as she could. I didn't know the exact mechanics of it, only that it increased her shadow abilities and made her emotions much easier to control. If she used to only stay in her room and come out occasionally, now she only left my shadow when it came time for meals.

"I don't get into trouble," I said petulantly, the tension in the air easing as a few women chuckled at my face. They started to dig into the meal.

"Who was it who tried to ride a bucking Fallingstar Beast?" Melina asked sarcastically.

"What is that?" Diana asked. In response, Ranni conjured an illusion of the metal bull/scorpion-like creature over the table.

"T'would make a fine mount," I could feel Artoria nod above me even as she ate. Occasionally she would hover a bite in front of my face for me to eat.

"See," I crowed in vindication, swallowing a mouth full of fish before talking. "She gets me."

"I would not deny that, should it be tameable, it would make a fierce mount." Melina deadpanned at me. "I only think perishing twice to one because you thought it would be more 'authentic' to mount it wearing only leather breeches."

"You can't have a rodeo in armour," I explained seriously. "It has to be chaps."

In my defence, I had been forced to find my own fun without the internet, music, or other forms of entertainment.

Boredom was the cause of most of my deaths near the end.

More than one woman froze, and I saw Emma staring vacantly into the air. There was a collective shudder around the table.

I didn't know what image the White Queen was sending into their minds, but the drool at the edge of her mouth and her murmur of 'assless chaps' had me rolling my eyes.

Dinner passed in such a manner, everyone telling stories, jokes and good-natured ribbing.

Emma and Tsunade returned to their long-running argument on whether sake or wine was better.

Glynda had drawn Robin into a discussion of her newest bodice ripper.

Diana talked with Raven about what she had discovered while out for the day.

Ranni and Melina were regaling Yoruichi and Scathach on some of my more embarrassing moments.

Artoria kept up her steady stream of eating even as Priscilla and Medea talked about the pets' most recent adventure. Apparently, they had flown circles around one of the Hydras and tangled its neck into knots.

I felt myself smiling as I looked over the chaos.

Ours was a Mad Love, but I was happy watching this still burgeoning family.

Eventually, the meal was done, and everyone thanked Medea as we moved to the large living room for the evening's discussion. A few grabbed drinks as we sat in various chairs and lounges in a rough circle.

I found myself in Scathach's lap this time, though I expected to be passed around more than once as the night wore on.

"Alright," I said, drawing the eyes of everyone. "I think it is about time we start. Robin, do you mind telling us what you found?"

"I didn't find anything," the former straw hat said. Her lips were pursed into a frown. "I searched all over the sea bed, in both locations and for tens of miles, but I saw no sign of either underwater city. No signs of any Atlantis or any civilization."

"Could it be in a different place?" Diana asked, looking worried. I could understand her concern as she had been friends with her world's Aquaman. Emma seemed utterly unconcerned that Namor the Sub-Mariner might not exist.

"Possibly," Robin hedged. "They would have to be in entirely different parts of the world, though. I was in my dragon form and spread my petals quite a distance. Could your ability have wiped it away?"

"Not if anyone was using it," I shook my head at her question. "It's not something I pick and choose. When I 'free' something, it is a conceptual thing. All or nothing. I didn't want to feel garbage rubbing against me, so I made the ocean 'trash free'. If someone was using something, like a city or underwater home, it wouldn't be considered trash, and it would not have dissolved. Items dropped by accident count as trash. Boats in use do not. If even one sapient creature still alive considered Atalantis home, I wouldn't be able to make it disappear."

"If they were there, they were wiped out to a man then." Tsunade pointed out. She had accompanied Robin on the underwater excursion. While everyone was powerful in their own right, it was common sense to travel in at least pairs for safety in an unfamiliar environment.

“Probably,” I replied grimly. “There were rumours online about Atlantians and a man with powers similar to Aquaman. They were old, at least a few years, but worth a quick look. If something happened, it was probably Leviathan.”

“Arthur would have called for help if he couldn’t save his city alone,” Diana responded.

“Would he?” I asked rhetorically. “From my research, the Justice League is a relatively new institution. It was formed to be able to respond to international and galactic level threats like the Endbringers or any of the space empires. It’s entirely possible Aquaman or Namor would prefer to remain isolated to avoid the chaos of the surface world. That would leave them without allies to call on if Leviathan attacked. Even sandbagging, they would be completely defenceless against its aquakinesis.”

“We cannot assume that the people we know are the same as those we remember,” Emma added.

“Speaking of,” I turned to her. “What did you discover?”

“The X-men exist, as do the Hellfire Club.” Emma flipped through her notes to pull up the relevant points. She sneered the following words. “The former is currently led by Xavier with Cyclops as his second in command, though he is thinking about stepping down now that he has a child on the way with Madelyne Pryor. My alternate is playing both sides of the fence. She enjoys the power and money the Club gives her but sympathizes with Xavier’s school and still dreams of being a teacher. She just doesn’t like things she can’t control.” Her voice dripped with derision when she spoke of the other Emma Frost.

“The Avengers are a significant force,” Yoruichi continued from Emma. No longer teasing, she looked the picture of the former leader of the Onmitsukidou. With everyone travelling in pairs for safety, she had gone to the greater New York area with the Mutant. “They formed after Behemoth sacked the city, thus the name. They are considered the strongest branch of the Protectorate, the national super force. This gives them more leeway and liberties than others, and they have a wide control range.”

“Did you look in Jamaica Bay?” I asked Emma even as I tried to wrap my head around the implications of the Avengers being another branch of the Protectorate.

The rough composition of the team was much different from its Worm and Marvel counterpart. Captain America still led them, and Tony Stark was well-known as Iron Man. Thor and Captain Marvel occasionally joined either them or the Justice League, likely when they were on Earth for one reason or another. Chevalier and Prism were there, which I recognized, but apart from that, it was filled with heroes I needed to familiarize myself with.

Spider-man was a well-known and liked vigilante.

“Empty,” the White Queen responded. “Jean Grey was not there, and neither was anyone else. Currently, everyone thinks she is dead, and I have not seen any proof to the contrary. Neither Hope Summers nor Cable exists in any of their thoughts, though I did see memories of both Magneto and Scarlet Witch.”

“We’ll need to keep an ear to the ground,” I said, partly to myself. “I know the Phoenix Force exists. I haven’t seen it in a few thousand years, but that bird brain is impossible to kill. Anyone who bonds with it automatically Tier 11, at the least. But they all go insane eventually.” That was an understatement and a half. Keep the mad psychic entity far from me, please and thank you. “How about you three?”

“None on the list you gave us were at those locations,” Scathach sounded disappointed above me, though I breathed a sigh of relief.

I had sent her, Artoria, and Diana to investigate various S-class threats I was aware of. I had done some preliminary research online, but I knew better than to trust the internet too much, so I decided to have our heavy hitters do a reconnaissance. They would be able to either deal with or retreat from anything they met.

Heartbreaker, Ashbeast, Sleeper, the Machine Army, and Nilbog were all threats these three could deal with, thanks to the Defences and their own abilities. I was unsurprised they found nothing. What was impossible to deal with in Worm was easy to do in Marvel or DC.

I doubted Slaughter House 9 would be able to survive in a world with Superman, and since googling it turned up with no results, I figured I was right.

The Three Blasphemies existed but were too mobile and well hidden to have these three find them in a day or two.

That left the Endbringers as the only S-class threats from Worm I was aware of and anything the Marvel and DC would throw around. The latter were more powerful but more predictable. Comics, for all the modern-age saw them turn grim-derp sometimes, were designed that the good guys eventually won.

The only question was what the cost was.

On the other hand, Worm was less powerful but acted as a perpetual misery machine.

“Anything else?” I asked Diana and Artoria as I could look them in the eye.

The pair shifted in their seats awkwardly. I continued to eye them, though they turned away and blushed. Eventually, Diana caved and told me.

“I had Raven teleport us to Themyscria,” she admitted.

“Ok…” I said slowly, not getting the problem.

“We were spotted,” Artoria explained. “They believed Diana to be the local version, and we ended up having a meal with them and sparing.”

“Ok…” I repeated, trying to understand why they were being so shifty. “Do we have a bunch of amazons on the warpath for my ass? Thinking I defiled their princess or something?”

“No!” Diana denied it quickly, waiving her arms in denial. “We parted on good terms, though when my alternate returns to Paradise Island, they will know we tricked them.”

“So,” I shrugged. “They know you three exist. They know you can fight. Big deal. We’ll deal with it when it comes up. Any secrecy we might have had went out the window when I crashed into the ocean. I only asked you to be circumspect because I like keeping my cards close to the chest. If we are going to be living here for a while, we cannot keep ourselves isolated from the world forever.”

“You are not mad?” Artoria looked so cute, all concerned and apologetic, that I wanted to hug her. “That we changed plans and revealed ourselves to potential enemies.”

“Why would I be mad?” The tension left me as I realized where the miscommunication was. “Diana wanted to see her home. I can understand that. I am not your master or someone you need to be afraid of. I cannot, nor do I want to, control you. I trust you all to take the actions you want. If you think they will have negative consequences, telling me would be appreciated but unnecessary.”

Looking around the room, I made sure to meet everyone’s eyes.

“We have an eternity waiting for us. If we micromanage each other, nobody will enjoy it. My plans are thus; I am going to look around this new world. Meet some people. Try and get a human body, or one close enough, again. Once I feel secure in our knowledge and ability to overcome what comes our way, I will do the tourist thing. I am going to travel the world, see the sights and get into a few fights. Life is for the living, and I intend to live.”

“Surely you have some plan?” Emma asked incredulously. “You always have some plan or scheme. You asked us to be subtle and hide. Why else would you be here instead of anywhere else? You said you wanted to travel the multiverse.”

“You don’t get it,” I felt a bit frustrated that they weren’t getting where I was coming from. More than one pair of eyes were looking at me in confusion. “Yes, this world wouldn’t have been my first choice of stop in other situations. We aren’t at the top of the food chain. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t without its merit. If we left a world any time things didn’t go our way, we would quickly grow bored. The point isn’t to find paradise. The point is that anywhere we are *is* paradise. It is up to us to enjoy it.”

“So if I wished to rejoin the Justice League,” Diana asked hypothetically. I could see the others also giving my words some thought.

“Go right ahead,” I shrugged my little squid arms. “If Emma wanted to kill her

counterpart and replace her and syphon off her money, I would support her just as if Scathach decided one day to fight the Avengers for the heck of it. Glynda, do you still want to be a teacher? Priscilla, do you want to sing professionally? Artoria, do you want to visit Britain? As I said, if you think it would inconvenience us, let us know; otherwise, if you want to do something, do it. How you all choose to live your life is up to you at the end of the day. I'll support you as you support me. Communication in a relationship is essential, but subservience is not." I let my words hang for a moment to sink in. I was about to continue when I was interrupted by an unlikely sour.

"I want a child."

For a second, there was silence as the thirteen of us stared at the speaker. I knew children were undoubtedly in my future, though I thought it would be at least a few months, if not years, before the subject was broached. To be honest, I had expected Medea, Melina, Glynda, or Scathach to be the ones to ask.

Not Tsunade.

"I'll need a body that can reproduce first," I answered the former Hokage. She looked so serious about the subject that I didn't make any jokes about tentacles. "But after that, we can talk. I am not opposed, but children are a big commitment. For me especially."

"So when you said you'd support anything we wanted," Yoruichi hedged, looking a bit nervous.

"I meant it," I answered earnestly. "I have my preferences, and don't expect me to do anything I don't want, but that doesn't apply to you all. I like to be tricky and hide my abilities, so I asked everyone to stay hidden, but I know some of you don't like the cautious approach. We're all adults here. We can talk things over. That is what communication is for. I am not your ruler; this is not a 'harem'. This is a family. One that I hope will last forever."

Scathach hugged me tightly to herself, and I pretended I didn't see any wet eyes.

I was uncomfortable being so genuine.

I liked to keep things light when possible, and talking about my feelings was rare, but something needed to be said if this relationship was to develop appropriately. Though this had all started with the Waifu Catalogue, I did not want slavish devotion.

My 'type' of woman was one who could think and act for herself.

Perhaps sensing my discomfort, Melina saved me from the warm gazes sent my way.

"Except in the bedroom," she deadpanned. "You definitely want someone to do as they are told there."

A new tension filled the air as more than one woman blushed, stared at Melina and I, or fidgeted in their seat. It reminded them that I had only been intimate with the kindling

maiden of the thirteen women present. More than that, we had been together for decades. If there was anyone who knew me and my fetishes, it would be her.

“This and that are two different things,” I responded with a smirk as I felt Scathach’s nipples press into my back. I was not the type who shied away from the topic of sex. It was essential to be open about your preferences; otherwise, you risked both parties being unsatisfied. “Anything is permissible between consenting partners. Besides, I never heard you complain. Right, Ranni?”

“Eep,” the goddess blushed violet as all eyes turned to her. Was embarrassing her by pointing out her voyeurism mean? Probably. Did I find it funny anyway? Definitely!

Things devolved from there.

I watched Yoruichi grill Melina on my preferences, teasing Ranni intermittently. Glynda tried to look uninterested and failed miserably. Raven took the chance to slip back into my shadow when she thought no one was looking. Melina said something that had Diana cough up her drink in surprise. Medea and Tsunade were talking about possible children and everything they’d entail.

All around me were smiles, jokes, and the sound of friends enjoying a night together.

I now had a better idea of where we were concerning Worm, Marvel, and DC. There were still a few leads I wanted to follow and people to meet. I had a lot I wanted to learn, but that could wait for tomorrow.

Though I lived in interesting times and had no plans to die any time soon, I couldn’t help but feel my happy ending was all I dreamed of.

Author's Note:

It's Alive! IT'S ALIVE!!!

Welcome to Volume 2 of Rapturous Rhapsody. To celebrate, have an early release.A thank you to Darklord331 for helping me find typos and giving me a sounding board for the comic aspects of the story.

This chapter went way longer than I thought it would and is a bit more exposition than I wanted, even after I cut parts to make it flow better. The ending of Volume 1 was action-heavy, so I am enjoying the chance to write some downtime. The characters are settling into a new life and dynamic, so they are still feeling each other out. Complicated by two new arrivals on the Island and Mikael being baby Cthulu.

Only a tiny part of the chapter was from the outside looking in, most from the inside looking out onto the world. I will mainly write from Mikael's viewpoint, but we will jump every once in a while to try and get a more complete vision of the world. I hope to show how far canon is in our rearview window.

We won't be seeing the lewds right away, as everyone jumping into bed with the Eldritch Squid would be a bit out of character, but they are coming as is more time with the women on a personal basis.

I am looking forward to the coming weeks as I have some great things planned. I will see you all next Friday.

EMANCIPATION II

Now everybody's got advice they just keep on givin'
Doesn't mean too much to me
Lots of people have to make believe they're livin'
Can't decide who they should be
I understand about indecision
But I don't care if I get behind
People living in competition
All I want is to have my peace of mind

"I love humanity," I muttered fondly as the two men left us with a pile of magazines and the remains of our breakfast. "We are a bunch of freaks."

"They were not that odd," Glynda said in their defence. I guess they had warmed her up. When the pair had sat down at our table, the former teacher had maintained a death grip on her hidden crop. "They were rather nice young men."

"They weren't, but they also weren't what I'd call normal," I said. "They were a pair of gay men, dressed in more colours than a rainbow, wandering the streets of New York in the middle of the day. When they spotted a pair of women sitting in a cafe, one seven feet tall and the other with pointed ears, their first response was to invite them to their club."

"As I understand, being 'hit on' is common in the modern world." Medea finished her coffee with a grimace. I hadn't bothered having them order anything for me. Compared to what we had on the Island, everything else was trash. "Courting is different from my day, though I cannot deny its benefits."

"They were not hitting on you," I pointed out. "They wanted you to be models for their clothes. Or didn't you notice how much they talked about the trim of your dress, the cut of your sleeves, or your Mediterranean skin tone? Besides, they had so much trouble keeping their hands off each other that I doubt they spent a full minute looking at either of you. Based on their rings, I would say they are newlyweds in their honeymoon phase."

"I had noticed their rings," Glynda also finished her drink and stood from her seat. She left some money on the table, picked me up, and started to make her way out of the lovely cafe we had been sitting in. "Though I do not think their clothes were too outlandish."

"You come from a world where colours have a very different meaning," I explained. "I wasn't just talking about them anyway."

"Those magazines you were reading," Medea said.

"Tabloids are a great way to keep one's fingers on the pulse of the current zeitgeist of

society. They are cheap, easily digestible, and filled with whatever the writers think will sell. Paparazzi, for all their problems, are like bloodhounds. If they smell a story, they will chase it to the end of the earth. Combining them with successful news outlets can tell a lot. If you know what you are doing, at least."

"Did you learn anything of relevance?"

"Plenty," I had time to kill while we waited for our target to get home. I had worried we were wasting our time after the first hour, and the women were growing bored. The two unexpected arrivals had kept them entertained while I continued my reading.

Medea's creation, a silver armband inlaid with charms on my right 'arm', didn't make me invisible. All it did was provide me with a moving Boundry Field that dissuaded most people from taking notice of me. The general populous only saw me as a stuffed doll and would discount everything I did as their imagination. Usually, something like that would be challenging with Nasuverse Magecraft.

Medea was a witch from the Age of the Gods with an Item Construction ranked A.

There was very little she could not build, given enough time, materials, and power.

And I could provide infinite power.

"Such as?" Glynda asked.

"About us? There is debate on whether I am a god sent to kill the 'false angel', whether I am an alien and Endbringers are my natural prey, or if Dragon, the heroine, sent out a call for help to the universe, and I answered. That last one seemed to think I would take her as my bride as payment. The general consensus so far is either wait and see or, and I quote from one magazine: 'Please eat more, Dragon 2.0.'"

"You? A god?" Medea giggled behind her hand at the thought. I chuckled as well.

"Apart from that, Tony Stark might be stepping down from the Avengers due to an alcohol problem. The Fantastic Four remain in retirement due to family reasons. Diana Prince, the well-known diplomat from Themyscria and Wonder Woman, has recently returned to Washington DC. And those are only the people columns. Other news includes there is a rising sentiment against Mutants. People here seem to think that any power that mutates the body makes one a 'mutant'. We know the difference between mutants and parahumans from Worm, as do those who study powers, but the average person doesn't. The last few things I learned included the ongoing party for the death of the Simurgh is still boosting alcohol sales. A UN summit to discuss the massive Dragon in the pacific. And a recent escape attempt from the Raft."

"And that is all important?"

"Not directly," I admitted. "It might not affect us, but it does tell us what is on the mind of the average person on the street. Every magazine I read was headlined by stories

about the ‘Super Scene’. Even though this country is an election year, all news about the candidates and their platforms was relegated to smaller articles. Nothing about any other country doesn’t involve some hero or villain. The same in the major newspapers. They were more concerned with Superman’s defeat of Bizarro than anything political, economic, or creative.”

“They are living in fear,” Medea said in realization.

“Exactly.”

“Why?” Glynda asked, looking between the two of us.

“Because they live in a world that can take their lives at any time,” Medea explained to the blonde Huntress. “In the Age of the Gods, when mysticism was much more common, the average citizenry lived in fear of monsters and Heroes. They needed the latter to defend them from the former, but they would do all they could to cast the hero down once the quest was complete.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Glynda said. “While huntsmen were treated cautiously, people understood that they stood against the tides of darkness. The heroes of this world do the same.”

“The tallest nail gets the hammer.” I pipped in. “Do not think of the heroes or villains in this world as Huntsman in yours. Think of them as Maidens or people with magic. Imagine a world filled with Ozpins and Salems. On top of that, more are appearing every day. The earliest verified superhero was Captain America during WWII. More joined him during that time but only a handful. Two dozen people at most, one for every hundred million regular people. Ten years ago? One in a million. Today? One in ten thousand.”

“I see,” Glynda hugged me tighter as we approached the three-story townhouse. “I can understand why they wish to keep track of such individuals and their actions.”

“It’s not just that they can’t control the heroes,” Medea expounded. “That is what Protectorate is for. It is that, by their very nature, heroes are passive. They respond to a crisis. They cannot stop them, only mitigate them. Villains, monsters, and the like have the initiative. Whether the monster is slain or not doesn’t matter to those caught in its rampage. Weapons will only work on the weakest of threats, those who weren’t a problem in the first place. An army didn’t defeat the hydra. Heracles did. They need heroes to fight what they cannot.”

“We’re here,” I stopped their discussion as we ascended the front steps. I wanted to hear more about Medea’s knowledge and experience with greek heroes, but that could wait. I wanted to avoid risking our target stepping out again after we had waited hours for him to get home. “Just like we practiced.”

“I cannot believe you convinced me to do this,” Glynda sighed as she held me up in

front of the door. “It seems to be my fate to cater to the whims of old mages.”

“I appreciate his sense of humour,” Medea said with a smile as she pressed the doorbell. “Even if it’s not as funny as he thinks it is, it breaks the tension.”

“Ouch.” I winced at that burn before assuming my position as we heard footsteps approach the door.

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Stephan Strange was tired.

Though his mastery of the mystic arts allowed him to keep up activity long past the average man would have collapsed from exhaustion, mental fatigue still built up over time. He had just returned to the Sanctum Sanctorum. It was only the second time in three weeks.

Whatever that Dragon, the Elden Lord, had done to the dimensional walls was something the Sorcerer Supreme had never seen before. They weren’t damaged in the conventional sense, there weren’t a bunch of holes in reality now, but something had definitely changed in their structure. They were more fluid, less rigid, in allowing passage.

There was no other way to explain the cascade of extradimensional entities trying to make their way into this reality simultaneously.

For the last three weeks, Stephen had been fending off incursions from Aggamon, Dagoth, Dormammu, Satannish and Nightmare, as well as a host of lesser beings. He had called on Dr. Fate numerous times for aid, and the Lord of Order seemed to enjoy the chance to ‘unwind’ after the disastrous meeting with the Dragon.

If he could, Stephen would banish the Dragon as soon as possible, if only in petty revenge.

That was a pipe dream currently.

The heroes had yet to find out anything about the beast since its landing. The only real discovery had been that the Jewel was a pocket dimension of some sort. One that overlapped with Real Space and had the most secure dimensional wall Strange had ever seen.

Not even the Orb of Agamotto had been able to pierce the mists surrounding the Island.

All this combined made for a very cranky, tired, and frustrated Sorcerer Supreme.

He was looking forward to sitting down with a good book, his favourite cup of tea, and then taking a rather long nap.

It was no surprise that he let out a groan of frustration when the doorbell rang.

Stephen was ready to ask Wong to tell whoever rang to come back later before remembering that his assistant had stepped out for some errands. So with reluctance, the former surgeon dragged himself from his plush chair and made his way to the front door.

It was probably for the best, he told himself. Thanks to the wards around the Sanctum, nobody should be able to ring his bell unless they were either desperate for his aid or were mages.

With his long years as Sorcerer Supreme behind him, Stephen Strange was ready for almost anything. He had dealt with world-ending threats, crazy mages, and even an anthropomorphic duck version of himself.

His meeting with the drunk Ducktor Strange, Mallard of the Mystic Arts, would probably be top of his weird list.

Used to the odd as he was, Stephen still blinked in surprise at what he found when he opened the door.

Two women stood on his landing, neither familiar to him.

The first was short, less than five and a half feet tall. She looked like a woman enjoying a day off with pale purple hair, pointed ears, and a conservative sundress. She was smiling in good humour at him as he opened the door.

The other was a complete contrast. Over seven feet tall, with blonde hair and green eyes behind a set of glasses. Her face was neutral, and she dressed professionally in a blouse-skirt combo.

Steven took the pair in with the speed of a man used to fighting for his life. What the tall blonde held in her outstretched hands really drew him to a halt.

To his mortal eyes, it looked like a cute doll. Its large black eyes, like that of a stuffed animal, and dozens of tiny tentacle limbs brought to mind some sort of franchise mascot.

“Good day, sir,” the blonde said in a deadpan tone. “Have you heard the good word of our lord and saviour, Baby Cthulhu?”

The Sorcerer Supreme barely heard the words coming out of her mouth.

Any other time someone pulling something like this would not only get the door slammed into their face, but they would also receive a few light hexes for wasting his time.

Instead, Stephen stood there, mouth slightly agape in a greeting unsaid as his mystical senses went haywire.

It stared at him, black eyes boring into his soul as he was laid bare before the monstrosity. Covered in blade-like fins, dozens of long tentacles moved in unnatural patterns. Its humanoid shape twisted and warped, at times long and sinuous, at others thick and bulbous. It floated in a void of darkness, its pale white skin radiating a sickly light.

Why hadn’t his wards caught something like this? How had all this power gone

unnoticed in one of the largest cities in the world? When had it arrived? What did it want?

Stephen thought he saw stars winking in and out of existence behind it, only to realize with horror that they weren't stars. The eyes twinkled at him in good humour. Gurgling laughter rang as blood tumbled from the pale eyes in a disturbing sight. The eyes were in on the joke.

The thing's head, chitinous and fleshy, twisted at him in a mockery of a nod. An orifice opened, a yawning void filled with teeth, blood, and tentacles.

Looking through that monstrosity of a mouth, a great EYE met his gaze. Fiery orange with a slit pupil, it evaluated him.

***It** spoke to him through the abomination. Even this crime against all that was holy and sane was but **its** puppet.*

***Its** voice resounded with Life and Freedom. The sound spoke of the birth in spring, tearing off your clothes to run through wildflowers, flying through the air on wings of joy and wonder. **It** held the promise of release from burdens. The spectacle, terror, and hope of the unknown.*

***It** was beautiful.*

***It** made his head hurt.*

*"I come in peace," **It** said. "Take me to your leader."*

Its words, those of the tiny squid-like creature, shook Stephen from his fugue.

Perhaps he was cranky at being disturbed in his moment of rest.

Maybe it was the shock of that vision or the headache it caused.

More than likely, a part of the reason was due to that stupid introduction, and the other part was long ingrained instincts that came from dealing with beings from beyond time and space.

Either way, the Sorcerer Supreme reacted as one might expect when an alien monstrosity knocks on his front door.

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As I spoke, I kept my pose, a parody of a crucifixion.

It was all I could do not to break down in giggles at the mage's poleaxed expression.

Until I had a human body, I wasn't going to be anyone's idea of a welcome house guest.

While my current Avatar was much cuter after all the effort I had gone through over the last three weeks since awakening, it was still a baby Cthulhu. So, seeing as we were going to meet someone who dealt with the eldrich abominations regularly, I had to make myself seem as unthreatening as possible.

And what was more unthreatening than a bad joke?

That I found his reaction funny was a complete coincidence.

My first indication that my first impression plan might have gone wrong was when the medallion that hung around the Sorcerer Supreme's neck, the Eye of Agamotto, began to glow with a bright white light.

Glynda reacted quickly, pulling me to her chest and moving her crop to her hand. Medea took a step back, her dress covered by a cloak that billowed behind her as purple magic circles gathered in its folds.

A haze filled the air instantly as the house shimmered with a golden light. My long experience with magic and my Talent told me everything. I felt the wards of the house identify as a threat. Medea froze, her face set in a snarl as the wards caught her. I was Free, of course, and so was Glynda since she was touching me. Sensing the failure of the restraining wards, more violent protections started to activate.

Strange levitated into the air, power gathering into his hands to blast us to smithereens or banish us from this plane of existence.

He was caught by a tendril of shadow wrapping around his leg and pulling him to the floor. It tried to crawl higher but was prevented by the light the Eye released. The light didn't seem to damage the shadow, but it agitated it as the glow brightened.

All this happened in the space of a second.

"Stop!" I shouted.

Everyone on my side froze. It wasn't a command seal, but it was close. A red glow pulsed from my chest.

The Sorcerer Supreme took the time to increase the output of light from the Eye, freeing himself from Raven's hold. The Sanctum's wards continued to charge their deadly defences but didn't release their payloads. Apart from that, no further action was forthcoming, though I did hear him chanting something under his breath.

I dropped from Glynda's hands and shuffled my way to Medea on my tiny tentacles. Touching the greek witch slightly, I Freed her from the ward's imprisonment.

"Now that we are all calmed down," I said as Medea dismissed her magic circles. Even constrained, she was ready to blast the house to pieces. Glynda remained tense, prepared for a restart of hostilities. "How about some introductions? I'm Mikael. This is Glynda and Medea. Raven is the one in the shadow. She's shy. As I said, we come in peace. Why don't we go inside and have a talk?"

"I'd rather not," Strange replied. Power continued to gather in the wards, enough to destroy a good portion of Manhattan. Way too much of an overkill for a bad joke in my book. "Tell me what you really are, Elden Lord! Why are you here, and how you got into

this dimension undetected? Then I might not destroy you, Abomination."

"Medea," I said in reply.

"Rule Breaker," She whispered, kneeling on the step of the house and pressing a jagged dagger into the house's foundation.

The wards surrounding the Sanctum Sanctorum were some of the strongest in the world. They were not impenetrable, but they had stood up to the likes of Dormammu, hundreds of monsters, and more than a dozen violent mages during Strange's tenure as Sorcerer Supreme. If a nuclear weapon fell on New York, those in the Sanctum would remain safe.

In a moment, it was all undone.

Where once was a bastion of magical defences, now was a regular townhouse filled with mystical artifacts. I wasn't worried about any sort of prisoners contained in the building. If Strange was stupid enough to connect a jail system to his defences, he wouldn't be Sorcerer Supreme.

Strange stumbled backwards as the benefits of being on his home turf, his workshop, were stripped from him.

Regarding reactions to threats, using Rule Breaker was a bit extreme. But I really didn't like being dismissed or talked down to. I was here not as a supplicant or client but as someone looking to alert the Sorcerer Supreme to a failure in his duty.

Just because I came in peace didn't mean I wasn't prepared for war.

"Ready to talk now?" I asked the horrified man.

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"This is some good tea," I told the man sitting opposite me. As I drained one of the cups, the teapot floated over and filled it again. It joined the other two held in other tentacles. Medea and Glynda were on each side of me, and Raven hid in my shadow. Their tea remained untouched.

The Huntress kept her eyes on the Sorcerer, ready to react in a moment.

Medea's head was on a swivel. She had returned to her day dress and was taking the opportunity to look over all the magic in the house.

Though the wards were dispelled, the building remained seeped in active magic. Shelves that held more than they should. Furniture that twisted to the most comfortable fit. Windows that looked out on impossible landscapes. Hundreds of other little spells had built up over the years to make the house feel alive.

"Thank you," the good doctor responded to my compliment with a polite nod. His

eyes flicked to Medea constantly. The greek witch barely paid him any mind besides to glare for a moment. After realizing that we could cause some real trouble if we wished and that we did come in peace, he begrudgingly invited us inside. “The plants that grow it are not native to this dimension, so I have to get it personally.”

“I can tell, I usually don’t like flower blends, but this one was such a smooth flavour I can’t help but keep drinking.”

“I find it helps me calm down after a long period of stress.”

“I can see why,” I nodded amiably despite his glare, taking another sip.

Was it petty of me to keep up pleasantries when he wanted to get on with things? Yes, it was.

Did I care? Not even a little.

I was a petty bastard when I wanted to be.

Stephan Strange stared at me, sitting in his living room and sipping his tea for several long seconds.

“Mikael,” Glynda sighed in exasperation. She finally released her tension and took up her own cup. “Leave the poor man alone. Didn’t you come here for something?”

“Fine,” I smiled as I set my cups down. “My apologies Dr. Strange. I suppose I was disappointed that you would judge me so quickly, even though I stated my peaceful intent. I allowed my childishness to get the better of me.”

Though I said it as an apology, it was also a condemnation. Judging by the increased glare, the good doctor realized as well. Nevertheless, he relented, the heat leaving his eyes as he nodded at me.

“I must apologize for that,” he said, setting his cup down on the table. “I have been a bit stressed as of late. A recent draconic arrival has stirred up a hornet’s nest that I have been dealing with for the better part of a month. My nerves were frayed, and I lashed out.”

Touche.

Pleasantries exchanged and barbs traded, we could move on to the main topic.

“I will be honest with you, Doctor,” I started. “I arrived on this planet and noticed an immediate concern. One that falls under the purview of Sorcerer Supreme as it is a multi-dimensional threat. I sought you out to bring it to your attention, should you have missed it.”

“What is it?” Sitting straighter in his seat, the former surgeon focused all his attention on me.

“Superpowers,” I replied seriously. “Specifically, the one’s originating from a type of brain tumour that my people called Corona Pollentia. They act as a conduit to multiversal entities that seek to sow conflict to grow. They grant superpowers to a host species, gather

data on their use, then reap the species to reclaim what is theirs. They then move to a different planet to start the process anew."

"You are talking about the Worms," Stephen said with realization. I watched him lean back in his chair with relief.

"Worms?" Medea asked, turning her attention from a bespelled painting.

"That is the common term for them in the intergalactic community translated to english. I believe the Shi'ar first coined it," the Sorcerer explained to the witch. "They are bottom feeders. They prey on undeveloped planets or those barely into their space age. Any sufficiently advanced society notices them right away and kills them. They are only a multi-dimensional threat in the most basic and crude terms. Little more than planet-sized vermin."

"Nevertheless, your home planet is infested with them," I pressed. "It has been for some time. The only way to deal with vermin is to exterminate them before they ruin a home."

"Normally, I agree with you," Dr. Strange nodded amiably. I felt he was happy to hold information I didn't have. "They landed on an empty version of the Earth during my predecessor's time as Sorcerer Supreme. She investigated and found them to be no threat."

"No threat?" I asked in surprise.

"Indeed." Rather than continue, he retook his tea cup and sipped it with a smirk. I could recognize and appreciate a bit of irony when I saw it, so I nodded in acknowledgement and took up my cup again.

Glynda wasn't so graceful.

"Are you going to explain, or shall we sit here for another twenty minutes sipping tea?" How much politicking she had to deal with Ozpin? I understood she was straight-laced, despite what she let me get away with, but there was a particular order to meetings between 'rivals'. You had to allow the other small victories when they came. That kept things amicable.

"Let the men play their games," Medea said as she stood from her chair and started perusing the shelves of books directly. "Your collection, limited to this open space, is curious. I imagine you have a more esoteric one hidden somewhere, but a few of these tomes have piqued my interest. I do not suppose you would be amenable to a trade?"

"I would be open," Strange said cautiously. "Though you will forgive me if I prefer other knowledge since I doubt you have much that my predecessors haven't collected. Such as the nature of that dagger earlier."

"Rule Breaker?" Medea asked, only half paying attention as she took a tome from the shelf. "I can't give it to you, nor will it work for anyone but I. I do have an original copy of

Pythagoras's treaties on animism. Notes and all. That will do for a few of these books. I'm sure you have other copies somewhere. You won't miss them."

"How?" The doctor shot to his feet, staring at the witch in surprise. "All those have been lost to the ages. The last known copy of a copy was burnt in Alexandria."

"I'll take that as a deal then," Medea said with a smirk. Five books of various sizes floated from the shelf and disappeared into her cloak. A tattered piece of papyrus appeared in her hands, which she passed over to the Sorcerer, who opened it and devoured its contents with his eyes. "I will throw in Empedocles' note on the human soul if you would be willing to answer my husband's questions."

I allowed myself a smirk as the Sorcerer Supreme staggered in surprise at Medea's words.

I had spent less time on the Island and in the Mansion than any of the women. I knew, intellectually, that our library contained any book we could ever want from our home worlds, but I hadn't thought to leverage that lost knowledge as a bargaining chip.

I had brought Medea originally as insurance with Rule Breaker. Her noble phantasm could no-sell most of what Strange could throw at us, and I could take care of the rest. My chest tightened with affection and pride as I saw her shark-like smirk.

"You are her," Strange said. He had retaken his seat and was watching Medea studiously. "Medea the Witch. The original from the legends. Wife of Jason. Argonaut. Last known to hold the Golden Fleece."

"I would rather not talk about *that man*," Medea said with a grimace. "I have traded up in the world, and any reminder of him ruins my good mood."

"You've been to Earth before," Strange said, looking at me. "Thousands of years ago. Maybe multiple times. There are a bunch of myths about white dragons around the world and lost continents around the world. I know that Island is not Atlantis, that always resided under the waves, but Plato reported a different continent in his works."

"Something like that," I nodded my head though I giggled inside. Let him make his own mistakes. I would sit back and watch the confusion. "But you were telling us about these 'Worms' and how they are not a threat. The Ancient One isn't well known for making bad judgements, but I would still like to hear her reasoning."

"How did you… Nevermind. You are correct that she had a grasp of foreknowledge that few could match. While I might be her magical equal today, that is one aspect I have remained behind." Strange narrated wistfully. "I never talked to her directly on the subject, but I have notes on her discoveries. She found the two Worms in alternate realities. There appeared to be some issue with their landings, and they both crashed. They survived, but their higher functions did not. The pair operated a little more than

bioorganic machines. They still sent out their powers but received no input back. No free will, no creativity."

"So why not kill them?" I asked. Could the Abbadon encounter have been more violent in this world? Instead of just hitting The Thinker, shards collided with The Warrior as well? "Put them out of their misery."

"She initially planned on it," Stephan nodded. "I do not know what she saw on those planets but whatever it was, and her predictions from it convinced her the world was better off with humanity gaining those powers. She has been right so far. Without the conflict drive and with no means of continuing the cycle, those who gained their powers from the Worms are indistinguishable from Mutants without extreme examination. Due to her decision, the world has more heroes than ever."

"Despite the Endbringers?" I couldn't help but ask.

"What do the Endbringers have to do with anything," he looked at me, confused.

"They are a result of the 'Worms'," I explained. He had been so well informed that his lack of knowledge on the subject surprised me. "They are conflict engines. Designed to push the world into more serious situations without exterminating the species to draw more data."

"How certain of this are you?" His eyes stared into mine with utmost focus as if trying to peer into my mind.

"Ninety-eight percent?" I half asked. I didn't know how to quantify out-of-context knowledge. So far, I haven't seen anything to prove that the Endbringers weren't a result of the Entities. "I ate one, after all."

"And that destroyed the Simurgh?" Strange looked at me dubiously. "Forgive me for saying this, but we have tried all possibilities for destroying the creatures. No matter what we did, they reformed or escaped their confinement. I personally banished Behemoth to other dimensions four times, and it returned no worse for wear. How do you know your consumption of the Simurgh will not be the latest failure, and she won't reform to terrorize some other city."

"Because I destroyed her core?" I asked rhetorically. No matter what he said, I was sure the Simurgh would not be coming back. I had felt her Die. My Life Element, my connection with Death, and my lack of still being Bound to her all pointed to one fact.

She wasn't coming back.

"Core?"

"You know, her nucleus. Her real body. The winged woman everyone sees is like her armour. She and the other Endbringers are just a bunch of hyperdimensional silicone flesh driven by cores moving around the body. Destroy the core, and they go poof. Sometimes

literally, depending on how you do it."

"A core!" He exclaimed as he stood, pacing around the room. I thought it was an overreaction to such a simple idea. "They have to have an anchor to tether them to this reality. Why didn't we ever think about a core? But we have yet to find one. We should have discovered something even if it moves around the body."

I watched him pace around for a bit, muttering to himself and couldn't help but feel a bit put off by the situation. Something didn't sit right with me here. Was it an information thing? I knew things that seemed obvious to me but wouldn't be to others.

"He seems rather animated," Glynda leaned in to whisper in my 'ear'. "You would guess he heard the most outlandish idea in the world."

"It might be," I said, trying to see where he was coming from. "We might have done the equivalent of providing Ozpin with a method of killing Salem. I don't understand why people like him, Reed Richards, or Batman never thought about a core before. After the first few times, I could understand, but it has been years now."

"Could there not be a core?" Glynda asked.

"The Simurgh had one. It was how I killed her. The other must have one too. Some sort of Stranger effect, maybe? Even in the book, a lot was left vague. He seems to have realized it now, so it may need someone to point it out. It might just be a misinformation overlap that I cleared up."

"If so, we needn't worry about the other Endbringers." Glynda took me in her lap. "The other heroes, once they learn of this, should be able to take care of them."

"You still didn't answer my question," I asked the pacing Sorcerer Supreme. He stopped and looked at me. "Even with the Endbringers, was it worth keeping the Worms alive?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation. "The Endbringers, for all their destruction, pale before the good the heroes have done with their powers. If the Ancient One saw the Endbringers, she would also have seen that we would overcome them and do further good. When you are Sorcerer Supreme, you must make difficult decisions like that."

"All right," I nodded. I had come here for a consultation with the Sorcerer Supreme and received it. While it wasn't the best result, that of destroying the Entities and their Shards, it was one I could live with. At least I didn't have to worry about the Golden Idiot ending the world on a whim. "Then I thank you for your time."

If I had been around when they first landed, I would have killed them ASAP. Now? If they died, we risked the shards going all Titan on us. In a way, Eden and Zion being brain dead were the best results I could hope for.

Glynda picked me up, and we made for the door. Medea followed us after leaving

another scroll on the table.

"If that is all you are here for, I won't detain you. But answer me this, Mikael. Why are you here, on this planet? What are your intentions?"

I couldn't see him, held in Glynda's arms as I was, but I could imagine him debating trying to take us down depending on my answer.

"I'm going to find a way to get a human body and meet with someone," I answered while thinking of that gay couple from not too long ago. "Then I am going to enjoy my honeymoon."

We left the Sanctum quickly, and I had Raven verify we were not followed. I wasn't too worried even if we were, but an ounce of caution could prevent a pound of harm.

"Am I being too cautious?" I asked my companions as we meandered around New York. Our final target for the day wasn't expected to be home for another two hours, so we were killing time and seeing the sights.

"No." "Perhaps."

"You cannot be too cautious," Medea continued after a nod from Glynda. "Knowing more than anyone else, knowing what people want and can do to you, is the only way to remain safe. We have a lot of only half-relevant knowledge from you, Raven, Diana, and Emma. You have taken steps to verify or disprove various hypotheses about that knowledge. To act as if we know everything due to our sources would be more dangerous than knowing nothing."

She echoed my concerns, but I nodded to Glynda for her to elaborate on her position.

"While caution and information gathering are vital to a secure operation, you are obsessing too much on gathering that information. We have a good grasp of this world now. Any further information we need can be assembled at will. They are known unknowns. You must not remain passive for fear of lack of information."

I could see where she was coming from with that as well. I wasn't the biggest RWBY fan, but I could see how trapped Ozpin had been in his passivity, continually ceding the initiative to Salem.

"Why didn't you ask him about rituals or spells that could get you a body?" Medea asked, taking me from my thoughts as we passed Washington Square Park. I wanted to show them the Empire State Building and Avengers Tower while we were in town.

"Leverage," I answered. "I am not going to trust anyone to either build me a body or provide me with the means to get one unless I have some leverage over them. Your move with the scrolls was brilliant, but if the Sorcerer Supreme could put some sort of failsafe in my body, he would. He is part of the Illuminati, after all. In fact, I would bet three tentacles that as soon as we left, he contacted everyone he could with whatever

information he got from us. Besides, I trust you to find a way if magic can get me a body."

I took glee in seeing Medea freeze in place, hands going to her flushed cheeks and wiggling in joy.

I was reminded of Carnival Phantasm and the Emiya Family timelines, the only cannon routes in my mind, as she collapsed into joyous giggles. She was so easy to please.

I almost felt bad for complimenting her into an absolute mess.

Almost.

"Can magic even give you a body?" Glynda asked.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I am kind of winging it here. Body Talent gives everyone a one-time optimization to our ideal form. It is applied automatically when you sign up for the catalogue or are bound, so I got it when I was first put in the Cell. I didn't sign up for any sort of shapeshifting abilities, and, for all their mysterious powers, Great Ones in Bloodborne are not known as shapeshifters either. Even my size change is only possible due to observing Priscilla doing the same and replicating with my Talents. I can manipulate my flesh slightly due to my Life Element, but that is the thing about Life. It doesn't care what form it takes. As far as it's concerned, a human body is a regression towards a lesser state of being."

"He is hard locked to only one Avatar as well," Medea added after leaving her happy place. "We tried connecting him to a homunculus. As soon as we do, that body becomes his Avatar and defaults to his Great One status."

"I've tried dismissing my Avatars and creating a new one, but that also defaults to my GOO form. If I had known this would happen, I wouldn't have gone for the Childhood's Beginning ending. Curse my completionist tendencies!" I shook a tiny tentacle at the sky, cursing past me.

That guy always fucked me over.

"At this point, our best bet is for him to keep practicing his limited shapeshifting abilities. Learning with Tsunade helps, but it is still a long time coming. Unless we can come up with a way to force his body into certain shapes, that is his best bet."

"I wish I had some of Ozpin's magic," Glynda said. "He was able to give the Branwins the ability to shapeshift to birds. I'm sure you could manipulate it into- what's that?"

Glynda's arms tightened around me, and she shifted to one side of the street to press up against a building. Medea followed her as screams rang through the streets. I did not have the practice with Haki that the women had, so I couldn't sense what they could. I heard crashes and bangs in the distance, but I couldn't get a good look at the situation due to being pressed against the huntress' cleavage.

Thankfully, the reason for the disturbance was coming our way.

Crashing down the street, the ten-foot-tall, half-mechanical form of the Rhino tore through the cars in his way as pedestrians were sent fleeing by his rampage. He wasn't moving too fast, but he was being incredibly destructive.

Behind him, swinging between buildings and pulling cars and people out of the Rhino's way, was the red and blue form of Spider-man.

"You can't take this turn, Aleksei," the arachnid-themed hero shouted over the screams. "It's a one-way street. You'll get a ticket!"

The vigilante shot a web at the villain's leg to slow him down but was forced to shift focus to pull an occupied vehicle out of the Rhino's way.

"Bug!" The Russian yelled, pausing in his rampage to pick up a motorcycle and toss it at the hero.

"Arachnid! Why can nobody get that right? You don't hear me calling you a horse, do you?"

"I'll crush you!"

"Should we do anything?" Glynda asked, her hand tightening on her crop.

I seriously debated the question. Even if Spider-man couldn't stop him quickly, the Avengers would get Rhino eventually. Ultimately, I fell back on my default questions whenever the option to be a hero presented itself.

Would it inconvenience me? Not really.

Could I get something out of it? Possibly.

"My first day off the Island," I sighed. "I should have known. I knew there was a breakout from the Raft. The Avengers will probably be here soon. Raven, can you be ready to transport us? Glynda, grab him. I want to conduct a very methodical and scientific test. Medea, continue to look pretty."

Though I was a bit bummed my 'date' had been interrupted, I decided to take this as an opportunity to try something.

Purple Aura surrounded the Rhino, lifting the two-tonne man into the air. I could see the Russian's face contorted in surprise but trapped in the Huntress's semblance. He couldn't even scream. She had risen to Tier 7 while on the Island, giving her an increase in power and control that she never had before.

"Woah," Spider-man said in surprise as he alighted on a nearby street lamp. "Rhinos can fly now. You've been holding out on me, Aleksei." Though he said so, his head remained on a swivel.

He found us in moments.

Medea continued to wiggle in happiness, unconcerned for the destruction around us, but Glynda was very conspicuous. Begin seven feet tall, holding a Baby Cthulhu doll and a

riding crop, and surrounded with a purple aura of power would do that.

As soon as he saw us, Spider-man flinched back, almost falling from the light post. He whipped his head around, looking skyward. I did as well, as Glynda approached the massive form of Aleksei Systevich, wondering if his Spider-Sense was alerting him to something approaching.

"And who might you be purty lady?" the vigilante asked, affecting a fake western accent even as he continued to look around cautiously. "I thank you fer the assist. The sheriff in these parts will be along shortly. If you could keep this here bandit in irons, it'd be mighty appreciated."

"You'd make a terrible cowboy," I deadpanned at the vigilante. He flinched again, eyes passing over me as I poured power into Medea's armband, before looking skyward once more. He could hear my voice, but focusing on me took considerable effort. Strange could only do so because he was so intuned with the mystical side of things. I knew Spider-man wasn't part of the PRT, so he couldn't officially arrest people, but he was well regarded enough that they wouldn't try to detain him, so he had nothing to fear for staying here. I didn't want to be bogged down, though. "Anyway, we're just tourists. We'll be out of your web in a moment. Glynda, would you be a dear and bring him closer? And if you can, do you mind cleaning up a bit?"

"Of course," she answered professionally. Even as the armoured man approached, cars righted themselves, the cracked pavement was repaired, and twisted metal was bent back into shape.

It looked like time was being rewound, but I knew it to be incredibly skilled telekinetic manipulation.

Spider-Man whistled, taking a more extended look at Glynda.

"Useful trick," he said, dropping to the ground and approaching us. I saw his body flinch again every once in a while, but he didn't falter in his steps. "Glynda, was it? Haven't heard of you before but welcome to New York. How's the big apple been treating you?" Now that he wasn't pretending to be John Wayne, I could hear a distinct Brooklyn accent.

"The food has been subpar, but the people have been interesting," she answered.

"What are you trying to do?" Medea sidled up to us, looking over the paralyzed Rhino. With my tiny frame, he seemed absolutely massive, but I was used to seeing giants, so I wasn't particularly impressed.

Sirens filled the street as the cops approached. Now that the situation had calmed down, pedestrians were returning. I saw more than one cell phone pointed our way and sighed.

So much for a low profile.

“Aleksei is bound to this armour,” I explained as I reached out to touch the metal with a tentacle. “Literally. He can’t get it off. I know I can Free people, but I want to see if there are any repercussions. He makes a great test subject.”

I could feel my Element responding to my will. I willed Aleksei to be ‘Free’ of his armour. Either he’d get his wish to be divested of it or turn into chunky salsa as the armour ripped itself from his body. Either way, I’d learn more about the exact nature of my abilities.

Luckily for the Rhino, it seems the former was the result.

Like water, the metal flowed off the man and fell at his feet. The tubbing connecting the suit to his flesh slid out of his body, leaving unblemished skin behind. His iconic helmet fell to the ground with a weighty thunk.

After a moment, all that was left was a discarded suit of armour and a naked man. It seemed like Aleksei retained the increased musculature the operation gave him.

I doubted he was eight feet tall originally.

“Hey!” Spider-man covered the naked man in webs instantly. “Kids could be watching. We keep things PG around here.”

“You can let him go,” I told Glynda. “We’re done here. Let’s grab lunch at home before heading to our last stop. Raven, if you would.”

“I’m not one to stop people from getting some grub,” Spider-man said. “But what did you just do? Any side effects we should be aware of? He’s not going to die, is he?”

“He’s fine,” I said, waiving a tentacle dismissively. I didn’t know that for sure, but I also didn’t care enough to stick around. The vigilante flinched at my voice, and, for the first time, I felt his complete focus fall on me. He stumbled backwards after a moment, finally piercing the Bounded Field surrounding me. “He’s Free now.”

“Stop!” The spider shouted, hands coming up to shoot at us, but it was too late.

We sunk into shadow, leaving New York behind.

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“Excuse me, I am looking for Taylor Hebert,” I heard Glynda say.

“Who are you?” Emma Barnes answered.

I couldn’t see them, hidden in a nearby alley, but we were close enough to hear them. Finding this place had been easy enough with Emma’s help, as had getting the pair’s schedule.

“My name is Glynda, and I am here representing the interests of Drakon Inc. Our CEO

worked with Danny Hebert in the past and is looking to reach out to him to offer a position at our company. We have been unable to find his most recent residence and would like Ms. Hebert to provide us with a number we can reach him at."

I had brought Medea today as insurance against anything Stephen Strange could throw at us. On the other hand, Glynda was with us because she was the most professional of the women on the Island. Perfect for playing the part of a potential business party interested in hiring the old head of a labour union.

"Please let your boss know that my father passed away last year," I heard another voice say. Taylor.

"Go," I told Raven.

I was being overly cautious here, probably paranoid.

All signs pointed to Taylor not being a parahuman. I had waited for her to be home from work and brought up her dead father to engineer an emotional response from any Swarm she might have. If there was anything suspicious at this property, Raven would find it.

Barring the death of her mom and then her dad last year, Taylor Hebert had lived a relatively happy life. She was engaged to her childhood sweetheart Emma, was working on her Doctorate in Literature, and had inherited a tidy sum of money from her father. Enough to put herself through university, at least while her fiance continued to work as a model.

Despite that, I took all available precautions against the Queen of Escalation. Emma had not been able to read her mind, and the Administrator shard was of such importance that, even if she had a different power than insect control, it was probably the most potent Master effect possible.

I had no plans to tangle with Khepri, armed with all the heroes of Marvel and DC. I'm not sure that was possible due to the varied natures of powers in this world, but I wasn't willing to take risks. This world was already funky in some weird ways.

"My condolences," I heard Glynda say, sounding genuinely sorry. I wondered how often she had to tell people their families, her students, had died in the line of duty. I resolved to do something nice for her the next chance I got. "Do you mind if I asked how he passed? And where is he buried? My boss would like to pay his respects, I imagine."

"He was buried in Bay Central cemetery with my mother," Taylor replied. "There is also a plaque on the Ferry if you wish to pay your respects there."

"Thank you, I apologize for disturbing you this evening. Do not be surprised if you find a gift in your mail from my boss with his well wishes in the coming days."

My shadow fluctuated, indicating Raven's return. We only needed the pair of women

distracted for a short time, just enough for the Cambion to spread throughout the house to find any hiding holes.

"Nothing," her monotone voice whispered in my ear.

"No bugs, costumes, suspicious tech, or anything?"

"No."

"That's that then," I sighed. I shook my head at Glynda as she returned to us.

A part of me was disappointed.

I hadn't been a big fan of Taylor early on in Worm since I liked my protagonists to have agency, and she mainly reacted. By the end of the book, she had become someone I could respect, so I was a bit bummed.

I shook off the melancholy quickly enough. Taylor was happier here than she ever was in the book.

"Back to the Island?" Medea asked.

"Not yet," I hadn't come to Brockton Bay just for Taylor. In fact, she was a target of opportunity. I was in town to make an offer. I doubted my target would take me up on the offer, but I figured it was worth the shot. "Take this road for four blocks, then take a left and keep going. You'll reach Panacea Park."

"I'm familiar with the name," Glynda said. "That is one of the people you asked Emma to check in on, correct?"

"When I found out Worm was an aspect of this world, Panacea was one of the first things that came to mind when I thought about getting my body back."

"She was a healer if I remember right," Medea said, pressing me closer to her bosom. "I thought healers couldn't help you. Your 'healthy' state is your Great One body."

"She pretended to be a healer," I explained, feeling a sense of loss for one of my favourite characters. "She was actually a biokinetic. Amy Dallon could manipulate flesh like clay. In the parlance of this world, she was a Striker 12+. Her exact limits were unknown, but I believe she could have manipulated my body into a human form if I let down my Polymorph Defence."

"She died."

"She did worse than die," I explained. "She proved the Joker right."

"I am familiar with that name," the Huntress pipped in. "Diana spoke at length about that villain. A clown and a monster."

"You can consider him Batman's arch-nemesis if you want. While he has taken various forms depending on the media, one of his most common themes is his desire to twist people. He believes everyone, even heroes, is just one bad day from becoming a villain. He constantly pushes people, Batman especially, to fall to his level. He's succeeded several

times over the years in various tellings of his story, and Panacea was his masterstroke in this world. One of the greatest healers in the world, an icon of good, turned into a villain."

"What happened?"

"I don't know the exact details," I pointed out to the pair as we made our way to the park. "I don't even know why New Wave, the hero group she was a part of, was targeted. Maybe the Joker was just having an off day. Perhaps he wanted a road trip. All I know is the madman made his way from Gotham to the Bay. He blew up New Wave's house while most of the group was home. He taped the whole thing. Amy saw her sister, the only survivor of the blast, be shot dead on live television."

"I could see how that would devastate the girl," Glynda frowned. "I have seen Huntsmen crack from less."

"She wanted vengeance," Medea said. Her voice was soft. Given her history, I imagined she sympathized with Panacea more than most. "She used her powers to get it and didn't care who she hurt to do it."

"She found him laughing over her sister's body in the remains of her house. Her mistake was in trying to make him suffer. The heroes got there in time to stop her from killing him, but after she had cooked up a deadly plague. Naturally, she took exception to them trying to stop her from getting justice.

The Red Queen was a villain for five hours. By the end of her rampage, the newly instituted Justice League had stepped in before she could threaten the eastern seaboard. Her body count totalled three heroes, eighty-seven civilians, and herself. The Joker survived the day, though he was bedridden for over a year. He is currently at large again."

"And they named a park after her?" Medea asked incredulously.

"She died in the end, and the tragedy was fairly well televised. While the death toll was pretty high, most of humanity knew her as a Healer. One who worked with anyone never asked for payment and had saved millions of lives over her career. She was only twenty when she died. Humanity chose to remember the hero Panacea rather than the Villain the Red Queen."

"Why are we heading to the park?"

"I figured I would talk to her, offer to bring her back if she wanted," I shrugged. It was a long shot, anyway. It would depend on what state of mind Amy was in. I wouldn't even make the offer if she was a raving lunatic bent on revenge. Even if she was lucid, she might not want to come back to life or do me a service.

"I had forgotten about Death being your patron," Medea whispered in my ear.

"I haven't," I answered darkly. I still needed to talk to that woman/concept. I was going to give her a chance to explain herself. Bringing Melina back granted her that much,

but I still wasn't really pleased with her. "Today is the first time I've been off the Island, so I haven't really interacted with her powers. I know the basics. I can only bring back people with their permission and at the site of their deaths. Everyone I bring back gets the benefits of the catalogue since they are Bound. I don't think I will be bringing too many people back."

"They will be able to control your Avatar, like us." Medea realized.

"I'm willing to take the chance this time because having Panacea around would fix my human body problem, and I think she would get along well with Tsunade. With Raven in my shadow, I don't have to worry about her controlling me for too long. All this is contingent on her accepting revival."

"Do you think that's likely?" Glynda asked.

"No. If I did, I would have been out here weeks ago. For all that the living fear Death, the dead are at peace. No matter their regrets and afterlife, most will not want to return unless they are tormented in some way. The only exception I can see is if Amy would come back for a chance at revenge. I can offer that. Unfinished business can be worse than any torment."

"It's smaller than I imagined," Medea said as we approached the park. She lifted me to her shoulders so I could get a better look. It was only three blocks long and two wide. "For one of the greatest healers in the world, it seems underwhelming."

"They just converted the damaged area from her rampage into the park," I said, distracted by the opening of my new senses. "I said they chose to remember her good deeds rather than bad, not that the government would fork out the money to displace people to build a bigger monument."

To say I could see the dead was a misnomer.

There was a visual aspect, a layer over reality I had never noticed until I sought it out, but that was different from where most of the information came from.

I could feel my soul, the fundamental aspect that made up all I considered 'me', reach out to the world, and the world responded with information.

I knew the names of all eighty-seven civilians who died here. I knew their age, gender, dreams, wishes, and fears. I learned how they died. The same for all three heroes who perished at the Red Queen's hands, Velocity, Night Watch, and Rockslide. The first two died when they touched Amy, trying to stop her. The last died when she created an infection that ate away at stone to reach the Joker again.

I felt the blast that killed New Wave.

I heard the wishes of a family of heroes whose only fault was trying to replicate the Fantastic Four too close to Gotham.

I felt Glory Girl's pain, fear, sadness, and rage as she looked at the laughing face of the Joker, her shields down.

I knew her last thoughts.

She thought of her cousins, the other family of New Wave, and hoped they weren't targeted. She thought of Dean, her boyfriend and wished their last meeting didn't end in another petty argument.

Victoria's last thought was of Amy, of how she hoped her sister would live a long and happy life after she was gone.

It was what I didn't feel that told me the most.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said, looking out over the monument to New Wave. My soul asked a question to the dead, getting an affirmative answer. "I might be getting a human body sooner than expected."

Author's Note:

Here we are with the next chapter.

I'll keep this brief since it is some bad news.

Due to some severe IRL problems, I find myself needing to move. This has seriously cut my writing time as I pack, find a place, and eventually move.

I am not willing to put the story on hold again, as I want to maintain momentum, but I also need to be realistic. If I can continue to release a whole chapter a week, I will, and that will be my goal. If I cannot, I will still write something, though it will be shorter. I can bang out an omake, What-If scenario, or something between work and the move in an hour or two.

I hope to have this situation fixed by the end of October, but I will still see you all next week for one of the most anticipated events of this fic.

EMANCIPATION III

And it seems to me you lived your life
Like a candle in the wind
Never knowing who to cling to
When the rain set in
And I would've liked to know you
But I was just a kid
Your candle burned out long before
Your legend ever did

Amelia Lavere returned to her quarters with a groan of frustration.

Her movements were automatic, ingrained into her over the last four years of living in this condo.

She first stepped to her bar and withdrew her drink for the night.

Today was Tuesday, so Vodka.

Specialty prepared, of course.

All the kick, none of the hangover.

Amelia then took her place on her balcony overlooking the Long Island Sound. Her overlook wasn't super large, she lived in a condo, not a mansion, but it was wide enough for a table, a few comfortable chairs and some engineered trees in planters. These days it was usually bathed in the pale blue of the Dark Moon.

Amelia relaxed in her favourite seat and lit one of her homemade cigarettes.

The tobacco helped calm her down, and she didn't have to worry about cancer after she had fiddled with the leaves.

Closing her eyes, she rubbed her temples with a sigh.

Why did she even bother anymore?

"Long day?" A smooth female voice asked her. She froze for an instant before she resumed her small massage.

"You have no idea," Amelia answered with another groan. "I wonder if hormones or superpowers are worse. If I have to heal one more person who thought using their power for sex was a great idea, I will scream."

"I know," a different, more mature voice agreed with her. "The Genin don't have the hormones, and Jonin know what they are doing, so the Chunin are the problem. I've had to heal someone from a miscast sex Jutsu or a scroll shoved up their ass so many times that I punch anyone coming into my office with a limp on instinct."

"Really?" The first voice asked. "I can't say I've ever tried it with my abilities, but

Devil Fruits are instinctual. Practice makes you better, as does creativity, but nobody hurts themselves with their abilities."

"Zanpaktou are swords, so they don't really apply here," a third voice, deep and male, pipped in. "I have heard horror stories from the Kido Corps and the fourth division, though."

"Violence and sex," Amelia said, taking another sip of her drink and staring at the sky. Maybe if she pretended not to see them, they would go away? "That's all anyone with powers can think about. Violence and sex."

"How wonderfully pessimistic," the first voice said with a giggle. "You'll get along well with him."

"Do you mind if I pour myself a drink?" The mature voice asked. "You have a few I haven't tried yet."

"Since you asked, help yourself." Amelia waved her hands dismissively. She had enough money that replacing even her best stuff wasn't a problem.

"Thank you."

"Are you all here to kill me?" Amelia asked, taking a long drag on her cigarette. "You are nicer than most about it."

"We're not," the male voice said. "We're just here to make an offer."

"One I can't refuse, I'm sure," the healer said wryly.

"You can refuse," the first female voice said. "I do not think you will once you hear about the reward, but if you do, it will only delay our plans for a few weeks. A bit inconvenient, but we won't force you. The Family is very big on Freedom of choice."

"So far, you have been much better than most people who break in," Amelia said, looking over the table for the first time to meet eye-to-eye with the intruders. "I can at least hear this offer."

Amelia had worked with some of the most attractive women in the world during her time as a healer. Models, heroines, and even the odd villain had been in her care. The likes of Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Catwoman, Poison Ivy, Emma Frost, Ororo Munroe, and dozens of others had been touched by her for her powers to work.

Even then, the woman's beauty across the table took her breath away. Long dark hair framed a face with aristocratic features, sunglasses keeping bangs from covering her face. She was leaning over the table, head resting in one hand. Deep blue eyes watched Amelia, a small smile on pale lips that begged kisses. A blue jacket framed an absolute feast of a bust and left her navel exposed.

"Does this happen often?" The male voice asked, breaking Amelia's focus on the brunette's breasts. A black cat was the speaker, yellow eyes meeting the former heroine's.

The cat had caught her staring. “People breaking into your place?”

“Three times since I moved in,” Amelia answered the feline. It was safer to look at it rather than the beauty opposite her. “Twice with villains looking to coopt me for my services. Once a hero, a friend of one of my victims, found me. None of them were very nice, so none of them left alive.”

“You’re not presenting the picture of a penitent healer,” the brunette said, dragging Amelia’s focus back to her. She wondered how those blue eyes would look from between her legs.

These days, sex was one of the only things Amelia could take pleasure in.

“I’m not. Just because I’ve made peace with what happened doesn’t mean I wouldn’t do the same again. I would kill the Joker quicker or make sure the plague stuck, but that’s about it. I am only partially at fault for the civilians. The heroes knew what they were doing when they signed up. Nobody would have been hurt if the heroes had let me have my justice.”

“Good,” the second female voice said as it approached the patio. “Just because we can heal doesn’t always mean we should. We healers get enough shit as it is. Don’t let anyone tell you that you should feel bad for dishing it back out. If someone hurts you, hurt them back. Forgiveness is for idealists and dreamers.”

There was a bitterness to her words, one Amelia would have been more curious about had she not been captivated by another vision of beauty.

If the brunette was a vision of classic aristocratic beauty, this woman was voluptuousness given form. This woman was shorter and had wider hips. Her legs were covered with tight pants that the healer wanted to peel off with her teeth. A beige top and green jacket covered most of her skin, except for the top of the largest breasts Amelia had ever seen.

This woman, holding a glass of specialty booze, was a grade-A MILF.

And Amelia always had a thing for blondes.

The deep chuckles of the cat tore the healer from her captivation of this newest arrival.

“Your drooling,” it said between guffaws. It tried to cover its mouth, making it look even smugger. “You should see your face.”

“Leave the woman alone,” the brunette said, pushing the cat off the table with a yowl. “I remember a naughty cat staring at Tsunade that first morning too.”

“You called me Tits all day,” Tsunade said with a smirk, taking a sip of her drink.

“Can you blame me?” From one moment to the next, the cat hopped off the table and transformed into a dark-skinned beauty. Amelia drank in the woman’s form with her eyes,

cigarette falling from her lips as she watched the cat-woman wrap herself around Tsunade and heft her prodigious breasts in her hands. “These things are special. I swear, they have their own gravitational pull.”

She was also naked.

If these women were here to recruit Amelia to the dark side or whatever, sign her the fuck up. All her counselling, recovery efforts, and rationalizations could jump off a cliff if she could spend one night with these beauties. The healer was ready to become someone’s minion if this was the view she could expect.

“Violence and sex,” the brunette repeated with a smile, not even blinking at the dark-skinned beauty’s nudity.

“I was never too fond of violence,” Amelia responded in a daze.

“Cut it out!” Tsunade said, spinning on one foot to kick at the cat-woman.

The dark-skinned beauty caught the blow on her raised arm but was sent skyward by the force of the kick. She shot off over the water, disappearing from Amelia’s sight.

“Is she alright?” The healer asked, more out of habit than concern, as she reached for another cigarette.

She needed it.

“I’m fine,” a voice said beside her ear. A dark-skinned hand pinched the end of her cigarette, crackling with electricity. Amelia took a drag as the cat-woman parked her naked ass on the table. “Tits here loves me too much to hurt me.”

“I’ll cut you off,” ‘Tits’ sneered playfully. “Better yet, I’ll ask Mikael to cut you off. You’ll be the last in line.”

“You wouldn’t,” the woman paled. “I have dibs. We have a whole plan set up.”

“Plans can change,” Tsunade smirked over her glass. “Especially if I tell everyone you delayed the festivities because you couldn’t keep your hands to yourself.”

“I’ll be good.” The brunette giggled behind her hand as the cat rapidly nodded her head.

“We’ve gotten a bit sidetracked. I’m Robin. This is Tsunade and Yoruichi. As I said, we need your help and are prepared to pay you for your service.”

“I have all the money I want, but if it’s a date with you three, I’ll give you my firstborn.”

There was a point in time when Amelia Lavere would have been shy about her sexuality. She would have flushed around such gorgeous women, stuttered, and only taken peeking glances.

That Amy died with her family at the Joker’s hands.

All that was left was the tired, jaded Amelia.

The woman who had killed eighty-seven civilians and three heroes in pursuit of vengeance. For a twenty-five-year-old woman, she was far too tired to deal with the bullshit of hiding how she really felt.

"Not on the table, unfortunately," Robin responded with a smirk.

"Damn it. I was prepared to make a child to give it to you and everything." Finishing her drink, Amelia set it on the table. "You still need to tell me what you want me to do."

"We need you to build a body, specifically, to turn something non-human into a human," Robin explained.

"I don't do brains, and I don't do cosmetic surgery." She repeated by rote. One of the first things she did once getting herself back together was to reinstate rules on herself. It helped keep her grounded. "Too many entitled people in the latter. Not worth the drama."

"You do not need to touch his brain," Tsunade explained. "It is a Cephalopod-esque body but a human mind. He was born human and still thinks like one, but his body is something else."

"A mutant," Amelia said with a sigh. "You could have just contacted the professor. I'm at the mansion on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I've changed plenty of mutants back to human form. No need to go through this song and dance."

"Not a mutant," Tsunade corrected, finishing her drink and setting the glass down. "And his situation is a bit delicate." Amelia rolled her eyes. How many times had she heard that? "And it isn't a one-time thing either. You might need to do this multiple times."

"How often?" The healer frowned in thought. A continuous transformation? It could be magical, or it could be a side effect of a Changer power.

"No idea," Yoruichi said. "It's a case-by-case basis. You could never need to see us again, or we could pop up occasionally. Ideally, it's the former, but our man likes to be safer than sorry."

"You want me to be your pocket healer? On-demand whenever you want?" Amelia asked in disbelief.

"I'll take care of any healing we need," Tsunade waived her concern. "We only need you to build the body whenever he messes up and has to start from scratch."

"And it needs to be kept hush-hush? There is something you aren't telling me, something that makes you think I'll turn it down."

The three women shared a look before Tsunade spoke up.

"Once we found out you were still alive, we thought about just kidnapping you, having you do the job, mind-wiping the memory and dropping you back off. Repeating as necessary," the blonde said. "That was what most of The Family voted for, but Mikael was

against it. Adamantly."

Rolling her eyes again, Amelia gestured to her anklet, which monitored her position and knew when she used her powers. Batman and McCoy's invention.

She was still on 'probation' after all.

"You do know what this is, right? I'm constantly under surveillance. Kidnapping me would bring down the X-men, Justice League, and others." Far from being offended about the notion of being kidnapped, Amelia was more insulted that they thought they could get away with it.

"We can be… tricky," Robin said with a smile. "They would never have known you were gone."

"We're the spy team," Yoruichi smirked. "We'll be your point of contact. There's nowhere we can't get if we put our minds to it. Ninjas, if you will." Robin giggled, and Tsunade shot the dark-skinned woman a glare.

"We were still willing to kidnap you, but he pointed out an important issue," Tsunade continued, deciding to ignore the playful banter of her companions. "This operation has an element of risk. One we want you to be aware of before you proceed. As mentioned, your help would expedite our plans by weeks, if not months, but it is not strictly necessary. So you are free to turn it down."

""You won't."" Robin and Yoruichi said simultaneously.

There was something about their tone, a wistfulness, an envy that sent a shiver down Amelia's spine.

"What is more dangerous than potentially getting kidnapped and mind wiped?"

"Knowledge," Tsunade said gravely. "Specifically, knowledge of Mikael."

"Someone will come after me for it? It can't be any worse than the situation I am already in." Amelia said with a shrug. If nothing else, this little meeting broke the monotony of her life.

"No. It is the knowledge itself that is dangerous." Tsunade's eyes went unfocused for a moment, staring at Amelia but not seeing her. "What he is right now, it's… it's not something the mortal mind can handle. What do you see when you scan someone? You probably get more information than I do, and I am the best where I come from. I was protected, knew what I was doing, and was already familiar with Mikael. I still wasn't ready for what I saw."

"Now, you're making me curious."

"Your medical curiosity does you credit, but peering into the abyss is not something you should do because you are curious. Once you open your Eyes, you can never close them again. This is why I agreed with Mikael about this little meeting. Even if you never

see us again and we never need your help, you will be forever marked by this if you choose to do it."

A woman who broke into the condo of the premier biological manipulator on the planet, drank her engineered booze and threatened to kidnap her just warned Amelia against meeting this 'Mikael' person. For a moment, just a moment, the former heroine was tempted to turn down the request.

In the end, Amelia's curiosity won out.

What's the worst that could happen?

Dying was not something she feared.

Living seemed so much worse.

"I'll do it."

"While that's good to hear," Robin said with a small, sad smile. "You're going to want to read the contract before agreeing."

The brunette pulled a piece of paper, thicker than usual, out of thin air and set it on the table.

Rolling her eyes, Amelia picked it up. While she wasn't a lawyer like Carol had been, she knew more than the basics.

'I, Amy Dallon, blah, blah blah… not to tell anyone… blah blah blah… not to harm directly or… blah blah blah… in return… blah bl-'

"What the fuck is this," Amelia asked herself. "What the fuck is this?" She shouted at the three women, her voice hysteric.

"The contract," Tsunade said, her voice bitter.

"A magical contract," Robin elaborated. She didn't sound as bitter as the blonde, but there was definitely a note of wistfulness. "A Geas. One that is binding as soon as you sign it."

"Is this some sort of sick joke to you?" Amelia snarled. She tossed the piece of paper aside and lunged at the closes woman, which happened to be Yoruichi. The black beauty made no move to dodge, and Amelia got her hands around her neck in moments. "We'll see how you laugh when your skin is inside out."

Only she couldn't.

Her power was still active. The bacteria in the air. The catch of poison she kept in her mouth. Her clothes clinging to her skin. A seed touching her ankle, she could sprout it in seconds to activate the anklet and call down the entire X-men on these women.

Amelia could sense everything.

Everything, except for the woman in her hands.

"This is no joke," Yoruichi said. The cat-woman did not show if she was

inconvenienced by having the healer's hands around her throat. Her face was severe, golden eyes no longer playful. Amelia would have been put off by the change if she wasn't so fucking furious. "You can find ways around a contract, even a Geas. I can think of three off the top of my head. Your reward ensures you will never break this one. You won't take the risk."

"This is real," Tsunade said. "Trust us, if any of us could be in your place, we would take it in a heartbeat. You have an opportunity here. Nobody else has. Don't waste it."

It wasn't the blond's words that convinced Amelia of their veracity. It was her tone. Jealousy bubbled under her words, a feeling the healer was all too familiar with.

"This is some sort of trap, isn't it," Amelia stumbled away from Yoruichi before realizing her previous action of tossing away the contract. The healer whipped her head around desperately, trying to find it and hoping it hadn't fallen off the balcony. She saw the paper lying on the table as if it hadn't ever been picked up. Amelia grabbed it with tight hands, frantically rereading it. "It's gonna be some sort of robot. Or clone. Or hallucination. Or some kind of zombie. Or, or, or…"

"You'd know right away," Robin pointed out. Amelia couldn't deny that. Her powers would allow her to detect any fake as soon as they touched. "Besides, a trap wouldn't be conducive to a long-term partnership. Mikael expected you'd have doubts, so he told me to tell you something only the two of you would know. To prove he talked to her."

"Wha…" Amelia started to say, her throat dry. "What did she say?"

"B-cups," Robin said with a smile. "He wouldn't explain more, said you'd get it."

Amelia giggled, a note of madness in her voice as the situation's absurdity hit her. Collapsing into her seat, the contract in a death grip, the healer laughed madly to herself as tears gathered in her eyes. Three pairs of curious eyes watched her as she tried to reign in her hysteria.

"I had just triggered," she said in between wet giggles. "Before pretending to be a healer, I told her I could change bodies. She wanted me to make her boobs bigger. She was so annoying, bugging me for hours. I made them smaller instead. She freaked out and hid in her room all day. I eventually turned them back and decided to pretend to only be able to heal. I made her promise to tell no one. As far as I can tell, she took that story to her grave. Vicky was annoying, a drama queen, over-enthusiastic, and too invested in my love life, but she was a good sister."

Amelia realized she was crying when her tears hit the contract.

The last time she cried was the day after her family died.

"If…" Amelia said, wiping her eyes and meeting the eyes of the three women who had broken into her condo. She hated the understanding in their gaze. "If he can do this, then

I'm his. I don't care if he wants me to work twenty-four-seven. I don't care if he wants Panacea or the Red Queen. I'll be his whore. His minion. His biblical plague."

"We don't need anything like that," Yoruichi put her hand on Amelia's head in an almost maternal gesture. "Just need a body once in a while and a little discretion."

Amelia seized the hand. It was still odd touching someone and not knowing instinctually everything there was about their bodies.

"You didn't let me finish." Amelia's brown eyes peered into golden pupils. Her eyes were dry and steely. "If I find out this is some sort of trick, some cruel joke, or a trap, I will find this 'Mikael'. I don't care if you're immune to my powers. I'll find a way to light his every nerve with pain. What I did to the Joker will seem like mercy compared to what I've cooked up in the last six years."

"Those are some good eyes, kid," Yoruichi took her hand back and pulled a pen from nowhere, setting it on the table.

"I told you," Tsunade said with a chuckle. "Do not mess with the med-nin. We know how to put you together. You can bet we can take you apart."

In a picture of maturity, Yoruichi stuck her tongue out at the blonde.

Amelia stared at the contract, pen in hand.

"We really are here with the best intentions," Robin, sensing hesitations, said gently. "We gain nothing but your ire from tricking you."

Before she could hesitate anymore, Amelia signed the contract.

There were no flashes of light, no claps of thunder, but Amelia suddenly knew, with a startling certainty, that she would never be able to break that contract. Not unless this 'Mikael' person failed to bring back her sister in the next twenty-four hours. After that, if he fulfilled his end of the bargain, she would never be able to break it.

"What now?" Amelia asked, suddenly feeling very drained emotionally.

"Now we deal with that pesky anklet," Tsunade stepped closer to the healer. Her hands glowed a pale green, and she hovered them an inch away from Amelia, slowly moving them all over her.

"What are you doing?"

"Scanning you. I want to ensure everything runs smoothly here since your power doesn't work on yourself. Quiet now. I'm trying to concentrate."

For ten awkward quiet minutes, the blonde scanned every inch of Amelia's body with her glowing hands. She did it multiple times, sometimes muttering to herself. Tsunade spent five minutes on her head, her hand almost pressed against Amelia's scalp.

"I got it," the blonde said.

"Finally," Yoruichi said, downing the last of her drink. Both she and Robin had raided

Amelia's unique alcohol cabinet once they realized this would take a while.

"Now I just need to build it."

The blonde stepped away from Amelia's chair, who took the chance to stretch her tired limbs, and approached one of the small trees Amelia kept on her balcony. The healer saw the blonde touch the tree's wood with her right hand, the other flashing in a movement of fingers so fast the former heroine couldn't keep up with it.

The tree started to twist and bend.

It grew larger and larger, forming itself into a humanoid shape. In a copy of Amelia's own powers, Tsunade grew a body.

A familiar body.

"If you can do this, why do you need me?" She couldn't help but ask.

"I can only do wood for now. Maybe we won't need you when I'm a higher tier." Tsunade explained as the wood-Amelia fell to the balcony. "I modelled everything perfectly. You just need to turn it to flesh and start the heart pumping. We don't need a functioning brain, just a body that will last the night."

"As soon as we try and take off the anklet to put on this, they'll know." Despite saying that, she touched the fake body and let her power do the work. When Tsunade said she had copied every detail, she wasn't kidding. Somehow, the woman had managed to grow wood and form human cells out of it. They were inert, still wood, but that microscopic control was something Amelia had never seen outside her powers.

Within moments, the wood-Amelia was a flesh-Amelia.

It was disconcerting to see a perfect copy of her, with a beating heart and rising chest, lying on her balcony floor.

"How were you going to kidnap me if you needed my help getting the anklet off?"

"This is only one of many options we have. It's one of the most reliable for the short term but by no means the most extensive. We were prepared to temporaly lock the anklet, but that would be eventually discovered." Tsunade said, grabbing flesh-Amelia's arm. Her open hand flashed a few more hand seals before touching the real woman. "This part will be disorienting."

There was a sense of vertigo and confusion as the room swam around Amelia.

She was staring up at a clothed version of herself from the floor.

"Did you just put my mind in a fake body?!"

"No," Tsunade said calmly, disregarding her panic as she picked up the clothed Amelia like a sack of potatoes over her shoulder. "I simply substituted you both, leaving the clothes behind. Anklet included. You might want to get dressed while I put this on your bed. It just needs to fool people for tonight. We'll be back later to switch again. Feel

free to dispose of it tomorrow. Ideally, nobody but you two will know we were ever here, or you ever left."

"What now?" Amelia asked once she got dressed. She had felt embarrassed being seen naked but such beauties, but now nerves were getting to her.

"Now you wait here," Robin said as the three women stood on the balcony. "If anyone visits you tonight, we want you to be here to talk to them and soothe any fears just in case. Yoruichi hasn't reported anyone approaching, and I've kept your neighbours unconscious." Amelia sent the brunette a look of worry. "Nothing permanent, but they will wake up tomorrow with a headache. We need to report that you agreed, but around 4 am, a portal will open to take you to the New Wave memorial in Panacea Park. We can only do it there. Late night will lessen the risk of someone seeing us."

"Try and get some rest," Yoruichi said. Amelia stared at her disbelievingly. "I'm serious. We're keeping tonight a secret, but there will be no way to hide her tomorrow. You will have a long few days explaining things as best you can without breaking the Geas."

"And how am I supposed to do that?" Amelia asked sarcastically.

"Tell people you faked her death," Tsunade shrugged. "Or you managed to bring her back. Or you made a pact with a dark god." Yoruichi snorted a laugh, and Robin giggled. "Either way, it is on you. We don't want people chasing us to bring back their loved ones. This is a one-time thing."

"Either way, get some sleep while you can." She still didn't look convinced, so Yoruichi rolled her eyes. "If you want to keep busy, make up one of those guest rooms for company. Starting tomorrow, you are going to have a roommate."

"We'll see you in a few hours," Robin said.

Then she dissolved in a flurry of flower petals.

"Remember, don't take any shit you don't need," Tsunade said before she vanished into a swirl of leaves.

"Showoffs," Yoruichi pouted as she disappeared. There were no special effects.

The three women left Amelia Lavere in her condo with a magic contract, a body, a whole heap of anxiety, and, for the first time in almost six years, a bit of hope.

******

Amelia knew it was time when a shadow spread itself on her wall. From the dark imprint on the wood, out stepped Robin.

"You didn't get any sleep," she stated.

“Could you have?” Amelia bit back as she pressed a few final buttons on her phone before setting it down. She would be leaving it behind tonight. No need to risk someone tracking her number.

The healer did not want to risk anything going wrong tonight.

“I suppose not,” the brunette said. She crooked her arm for Amelia to grab, which she did. Like Yoruichi and Tsunade, she could sense nothing from the woman. “You at least dressed warmly. I do not know how long this will take, but there is an autumn chill tonight. Now take a deep breath. This might be a bit odd.”

“I’ve teleported before.”

“Good.”

Robin led her towards the swirling shadow, and Amelia tensed on instinct, ready to hit a wall. Instead, she transitioned from wooden floors to concrete between steps. Faint vertigo was the only indication she had travelled a few hundred miles in an eye blink.

It was dark out, too dark to see anything.

Too dark to be in the middle of a city.

“We’ve isolated the park in a shadow bubble,” Robin explained, sensing Amelia’s worry. “Don’t want someone waking up in the middle of the night and seeing us.”

“Wow,” Amelia snarked. “Good thinking. Nobody can see us. Not even us.”

“We didn’t think about you, sorry,” the male voice of Yoruichi’s cat form said from somewhere nearby. “We can all see in the dark, so we didn’t notice.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Tsunade’s mature voice rang from the shadows.

Suddenly there was light.

All at once, the trees in the park were lit with bioluminescent leaves, shading the area in a green glow and giving Amelia the first-ever view of the park named after her.

It wasn’t very large, only a few blocks long and wide, with a few paved paths meandering through it. There were a few benches here and there and some street lamps that were not radiating any light.

In the center of the park was the monument.

It was a simple thing, only four feet high and three wide, a trapezoid made of bronze. A plaque covered the front, a small epitaph written on it.

‘In loving memory of the Dallons
Mark, Carol, Victoria, and Amy Dallon
New Wave were inspiring heroes, one and all
They will be sorely missed’.

Amelia stared at the plaque, unable to tear her eyes away from the words.

In the last six years, she had never visited this place. Not only for her own safety, as people were meant to think she had died, but also because she had never expressed an interest in visiting.

The professor had offered to take her under disguise once he declared her capable of interacting with the rest of humanity. That had been two years after their death.

Amelia had declined.

The park represented too many failures for it to bring her any sort of closure.

It all seemed so petty now.

"Would you like us to give you some privacy," an unfamiliar voice asked, shaking Amelia from her stupor.

She found it sitting at the base of one of the glowing trees nearby.

With the way Tsunade had described Mikael, Amelia had expected something horrific.

Instead, she saw something more like a children's mascot or stuffed toy.

It was a pale white, almost purplish, and only a few feet tall. Small fins covered its body. Its lower half comprised a half dozen chubby tentacles connected to a humanoid torso. Four more tentacles, larger than the others, acted as arms. Two held Yoruichi's cat form, and two others rubbed through her fur. The cat had a blissed-out expression, purring loud enough that Amelia could hear it from ten feet away. Mikael's head was bulbous, half the size of his torso, and his only features were a circular hole for a mouth and large black eyes.

He honestly looked adorable.

"No need," Amelia shook off her melancholy. "Let's get this over with. I'll need some biomaterial, but a few of these trees should work. I'll also need a picture or something if you want to look like you used to. It would work better if you have some of your old DNA."

"We have something for that," Mikael said, nodding to Tsunade. The blonde pulled a scroll of some sort from her jacket. She unrolled it onto the pavement and pressed her hands on the black squiggly lines that covered it. In a puff of smoke, two large barrels sat upon the rolled-out paper. "Two barrels of my blood when I was human…ish."

"Why do you… You know what? I don't care. This will work fine." Amelia took off the top of the barrels, noticing mystical symbols carved on the wood. Likely to keep the liquid from coagulating or going bad. The healer knew nothing about the mystic arts, so she didn't bother to think more deeply about it.

Touching the blood to verify she could manipulate it, it was better to be safe than sorry after her recent string of failures.

Right away, Amelia discovered what Tsunade was talking about.

This was blood only in the manner that the sun was a flame.

Technically accurate, but wholly underselling things.

First of all, it was a universal donor. Not just for humans but for all life. Amelia could inject this stuff into a tree, a reptile, a fish, a martian, and anything else she had scanned in the past. Whatever received it would accept it unconditionally as its own, with no rejection.

Secondly, the blood would act to improve whatever ingested it. Amelia couldn't tell how the thing would improve, just that it would take the subject and make them 'more'. Healthier. Stronger. Faster. Better in every way imaginable.

There were a whole host of other things in the blood. A Changer effect of some sort.

-No. Wait.

Multiple changer effects, some limited to an ocular mutation but others so powerful and esoteric that *Shaper* could not understand them.

"What world are these barrels from," the *Unkown/Lifebringer* asked.

"Elden Ring," the *Anomaly/Woodshaper* answered. A breeding pair? Need more compatible members of the species to ensure continual reproductive viability. Effects of *blood* on offspring to be observed. "We didn't want to risk contamination from Bloodborne that might make the body take on a Great One form."

"Then why is she flipping shit?"

"Early Elden Ring or late Elden Ring?" *Anomaly/Feline-changer*. Biologically viable? Unknown. More data needed.

"You think my dragon communion might have caused this?"

"Amelia," *Anomaly/Flower-shifter*? More data needed. "Are you all right?"

Unable to scan. More data needed.

"'m fine… I'm fine." Amelia shook her head as she stumbled backwards. Her hands were spotless, despite having just been elbow-deep in *the blood*. "It's everything you said it was Tsunade. I wasn't ready. But I'm good to go now."

"But…" the busty blonde said with a frown. "The blood isn't what I was talking about."

"We should put this off for a while." Mikeal was staring up at her, black eyes creasing in concern. "Try it another time once you have a chance to recover. It doesn't have to be tonight. We can wean you onto the bizarre stuff. Too much Insight risks Frenzy build-up."

"NO!" Amelia shouted desperately. "I'm fine. Really! I can do it."

"Your nose is bleeding." The baby squid monster deadpanned at her. Amelia furiously rubbed her nose to clear the blood. "I'm already taking a risk to lower my Defence for you

to do this. If you aren't at your best, I want to avoid an accident."

"I can do it." Amelia fell to her knees to meet his black eyes at an equal level. She reached out to touch him, but he scuttled away before she could. "Please!" She begged, close to tears for the second time tonight.

He opened his circular mouth to answer, but, whatever his decision would have been, Amelia never got to hear his choice.

"We've got incoming! And fast!" Yoruichi said.

Four pairs of eyes focused on Amelia with a laserlike intensity, and suddenly, she was panicking for a different reason.

"I didn't tell anyone! I swear!"

"Where?" Robin asked the cat. The brunette crossed her hands over her chest and closed her eyes.

"In the sky, forty miles south and half a mile up. Flying through the clouds."

"I've got it," Robin said, her brows furrowed in concentration. "An air vehicle. Very streamlined. Two passengers. Both male. Pilot is short and hairy. Most prominent features are sideburns and a cigar. Other is also male. Bald and in a wheelchair. They were at the mansion she worked at today."

"Professor X and Wolverine," Mikael identified as quickly as Amelia. His black eyes stared into her own, and she felt herself trembling.

"Please," she begged, actively weeping now. "You have to believe me. I didn't tell anyone."

"I know you didn't," Mikael said, and Amelia sagged in relief. "If you had tried, the Geas would have stopped you. That and we were watching you."

"I can take it down," Robin said, eyes still closed. "They are over a stretch of a forest at the moment."

"Don't," Mikael sighed, his tentacles drooping. "My luck is terrible. There is no way they are just going out for an early morning mission. We'll wait for them, might as well see what gave us away. Worst come to worst, we'll incapacitate them till tomorrow. We'll be long gone by then."

The squid man returned to petting Yoruichi while they waited for the X-men to arrive.

They didn't have to wait long.

Though the X-jet was quiet, it was still audible in the dead of night. Amelia couldn't see it outside the shadow field, but she could hear it above their head. She had been in it a few times and recognized the small his as it set itself into a hovering position.

"Can you roll out the welcome mat, Raven?" Mikael spoke to the night air. "One of them is impaired."

A portion of the shadow wall receded, allowing the distant light of the city to frame two shapes. One, short and stocky, stood protectively in front of the one in a wheelchair. The shadows closed behind the pair, sealing them in this sepulchral park.

“Welcome,” Mikael called out, still petting Yoruichi. “You weren’t invited, but I should at least be courteous to such well-known heroes when they decide to interrupt my business. What can we help you fine gentlemen with tonight?”

Logan tensed, claws extending from his knuckles, as he crouched.

In complete opposition to the women of the park, Amelia realized. Neither Tsunade nor Robin were tense in the least. They remained alert but relaxed.

“Who are you? What have you done to Amelia?” The Canadian growled at the tiny creature.

“I see you are as diplomatic as expected, Logan,” Mikael deadpanned. Amelia wasn’t too familiar with the squid-man, but she could identify a hint of annoyance in his tone. “That’s fine. I’ll deal with Charles if you don’t play ball.”

“Like hell you will!” The hairy mutant made to lunge at squid-baby but was stopped immediately.

A foot planted itself in his face, punting him into the park’s shadows. The mutant tumbled end over end, crashing through a tree before skidding to a stop by jamming his claws into the dirt.

A woman stood in his path. Only slightly taller than him, Amelia saw she wore a skin-tight purple body suit that covered everything under her neck. Long purple hair wrapped in a veil fluttered behind her.

“He’s a regenerator. Able to heal from pretty much anything. Also, he has an adamantium skeleton, so his limbs won’t break.” Mikael said conversationally as if talking about the weather. “Don’t kill him. But have fun.”

“You give me the best gifts, dear,” the new arrival said with a throaty chuckle that would have turned Amelia gay if she wasn’t already.

A pair of barbed blood-red spears appeared in her hand, and she disappeared from Amelia’s sight. The only sign of her movement was an indent on the ground and Wolverine being blasted into another tree. Soon the ring of metal rang out in the park.

“Now that he is occupied,” Mikael said to the professor. The bald man’s wheelchair was being wheeled closer by another new arrival. “We can talk like adults.”

She was taller than Amelia. Blonde and with piercing emerald eyes. Her hair was done in a bun, but she let her bangs fall to frame her face. In her hair was a golden crown of some sort, reminding Amelia of her sister. Like the other arrival, she was wearing a body suit. However, hers was closer to a leotard, letting Amelia see another prodigious bust.

This woman, whoever she was, radiated displeasure in waves. Something about her, an intangible charisma, made the healer anxious like never before.

This was not someone you wanted mad at you.

“I wish you had not baited him,” Charles Xavier said with a sigh. “He has enough trouble with anger without others pushing his buttons.”

“She was getting bored,” the squid’s tentacles made a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “I figured they could keep each other occupied while we talked. Now, why are you here?”

“You will answer Sir Mikael, or I will be most… displeased,” the blonde said to the professor. Her face set into a severe frown as her green eyes flashed gold.

“What’s got you so worked up, Artoria?” Mikael asked, concern in his voice. “I’m annoyed, sure, but you’re denting his chair.”

The busty blonde hurriedly let go of the wheelchair’s handles, allowing Amelia to see imprints of her fingers in the metal. Snickering brought the former heroine’s attention to Robin, who was giggling behind a hand. Yoruichi was chortling to herself, still a cat, and even Tsunade was laughing softly.

“One would think he was interrupting your plans for the night,” Robin said teasingly.

“Hold your tongue!” Artoria ordered the giggling brunette. She would have been more intimidating if her face wasn’t flushed.

“Sorry about them,” Mikael said to Xavier. “As I said, we can talk now. What can we do for you tonight?”

The bald mutant, leader of the X-men, had been silent until now, looking at everyone in turns. Finally, the professor met Mikael’s eyes.

“Elden Lord,” the man said. The title was unfamiliar to Amelia, but the cephalopod did not blink at the odd words, simply nodding his head. “I hope you do not intend to harm young Amelia. She has been through enough.”

“Just the opposite, my good man,” the baby squid said with false good cheer. “Tonight, I will make her greatest wish come true.”

“By making her one of your ‘consorts’?” Charles said with a deep frown, looking around the park at all the beautiful women. Metal continued to clang in the distance. Amelia heard Logan grunt in pain.

“What? No!” For the first time that night, Mikael looked genuinely confused. “Why would I do that? I just want a human body back. Strange should have told you that.”

“Your Herald, the Goddess Ranni, did not paint a flattering picture of your interaction with ‘interesting’ women,” the mutant said, his face firm. “Your companions have lent her words credence.”

“I swear, I’m going to spank that woman when I get the chance,” Mikael said with a

deep sigh, rubbing a tentacle against his temple. “I have no idea what she told you but believe me, I am not looking for any more ‘consorts’. Kind of have a back order on the ones I have now.”

Xavier looked relieved at his words, but some people just liked to poke and prod.

“Awe,” Yoruichi fake pouted in his hands. “I was hoping you changed your mind on that. We could have a set. She has a mousy look that makes you want to eat her up.” Amelia flushed, a part of her was flattered that such a beautiful woman was attracted to her.

In response, Mikeal bonked the cat on her head with a tentacle and tossed her over his shoulder.

“Miss Dallon-”

“Lavere,” Amelia responded on instinct. When had Artoria gotten so close? When had her hand gotten on Amelia’s shoulder?

“Miss Lavere.” Green eyes flecked with gold peered into her soul. “You are a lovely young woman. I’m sure you will make someone very happy someday. However,” her hand tightened on Amelia’s shoulder to an uncomfortable degree. “We are not recruiting at the moment. The long march is almost done. The war was nearing its end. We had to overcome unexpected foes, a third force who stole a march on us, but the victory draws near. The soldiers are ready to reap their rewards and return home to peace. I ask you to do your duty and withdraw from the battlefield lest you draw their ire. Am I understood?”

No, Amelia didn’t understand a damn thing.

“I understand,” she said, and the pressure on her shoulder disappeared.

“Wonderfull,” Artoria said imperiously, acting as if she hadn’t just threatened the healer. “You shall have your own rewards for your efforts.”

Tsunade was chuckling, a fist clutched in her mouth to prevent full laughter. Robin was not even trying to hide her mirth, doubled over with shaking shoulders. Yoruichi was rolling in the dirt, laughing hysterically.

Professor X was watching the pair, a befuddled look on his face.

Mikael was still rubbing his temples with his tentacles.

“That broke the tension,” he said with a light chuckle. Turning to the bald mutant, he continued. “You never answered. What can we help you with tonight?”

“I was concerned for Amelia,” the mutant said.

“See, I believe that. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have come here with just Logan. If you knew we were here, I bet dollars to donuts we’d see the entire X-men team. But I also know it isn’t the whole story. We checked up on you guys after we visited her, and none of you showed any knowledge that we had contacted her. So why don’t you tell us how you

knew where she'd be this morning." Despite looking like a stuffed doll, Mikael's black eyes pierced the professor's. One would think he was the world's premier telepath, not Xavier.

"She told me," the bald man sighed.

"I did not!" Amelia defended vigorously. Everything she had seen tonight seemed to point to the fact that Mikael would be able to fulfill his end of the bargain, and she did not want to risk anything stopping it now.

"Not willingly or knowingly," Mikael nodded as if having received the answer he expected. "The Geas prevented that, and its magic would prevent the information from being pulled from your mind. But it would have done nothing against commands already implanted in your mind. Any actions you took while controlled would not have counted as 'you'. An oversight on my part. So tell me, Charles, what sort of control do you have rutting around in that head of hers?"

"You said you removed them all!" Amelia nearly screamed at the paralyzed man. "That you trusted me when I moved out." The fact he controlled her didn't matter that much. Charles had been clear about that when Batman dropped her into his care for 'counselling'. What infuriated her was that not only had he broken his word, but Xavier might just have cost her her reward.

"I do trust you," Professor X said softly, looking at her with a combination of pride and pity. "When we met, you were a broken, vengeful woman. The person I see now is well adjusted, if misanthropic, member of society. I cannot tell you how proud I am of who you've become over the years. You prove that no matter how far gone someone is, there is always hope for redemption. I removed all the mental blocks and controls I could on you when you left us."

"Aha!" Mikael exclaimed, piecing something together. "So the anklet does do something. I was wondering if it was a false lead we had fallen for."

"It does tell us where she is, but it also acts as a beacon we can respond to if she is in trouble. The only control left on her mind is a subliminal order to contact someone if the anklet is removed and tell us where she is being brought and the goal. It is so deep that no other telepaths I know about would have found it if they controlled her. If she was ever coerced or forced to remove the anklet, we would be able to intervene." The bald man shook his head and met Amelia's eyes. "Ten minutes ago, I received a text from you that you would visit your sister in this park. I wished to be here as a support for you and provide protection just in case."

"I'm fine," Amelia insisted, wiping her bloody hand on the back of her pants. "I'll be back this morning. We can talk then. They brought me here, and they'll return me." The Geas would prevent her from spilling any of Mikael's secrets, but she could explain a few

things at least.

If Professor X prevented her from seeing her sister again, no amount of therapy would prevent her from going Red Queen on his ass.

“You do not know who you are dealing with here, Amelia,” Charles insisted in turn. “We do not know if we can trust the Elden Lord. He is-”

“I’ve heard what I wanted,” Mikeal said with finality, interrupting the mutant. “Robin, gag him. His powers don’t work on anyone here. We have our own telepath running interference. Though I think she’ll be rather miffed, she missed his little trap,” the squid explained to the healer as a hand sprouted from the paraplegic’s shoulder and covered his mouth. He turned a glair on the gagged man. “I don’t want to hear about trustworthiness from someone who admitted to manipulating someone’s mind. That’s the problem with telepaths; everything looks like a nail when you have all you have is a hammer.”

“Are we still…” Amelia started to ask before trailing off.

“We’ll give it a shot,” the squid scuttled closer to the former heroine. “If you can’t do it, or I think something’s gone wrong, we’ll try again later.

Amelia sighed in relief even as Charles Xavier struggled to speak. More limbs sprouted around him, holding him in place.

Setting one hand into *the blood*, the healer carefully reached out to touch the squid-man.

She wasn’t ready.

An endless universe of stars watched her. Millions of years old, yet still so young. Expanding yet shrinking. Wiggling tentacles wrapping around planets and a voracious maw swallowing continents. With everything consumed, more life flourished, madly spreading infinitely.

“Well, this is an experience.”

Caution.

“You must be Shaper. A pleasure.”

Inquiry.

Tentacles. Blades. Teeth. Hair. Beasts. Eyes. So many eyes. The eyes were laughing. The eyes were taunting her with forbidden knowledge. The eyes were crying tears of blood. Old Blood. Beast Blood. Ashen Blood.

Bloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodblood. An ocean of blood. A sea of blood. A bottomless sea.

“She’s not handling it well, is she?”

Concern.

“Is that concern for her or for a useful host? I guess they are the same to you.”

Request.

A panacea to heal all ills. A plague to sweep the world. Knowledge to elevate humanity. An endless curse to bring them low.

"Let me see if I can Free you a bit, it might help us both."

Inquiry. Data.

"Hold still. This shouldn't hurt a bit."

Shock. Ecstasy.

Amelia/Shaper knew what to do.

Unknown/Mikael was seeking to shape him/itself into a sub-optimal form.

In return for data/sister, she/it would help.

But she/it was sub-optimal.

Mikael/Unknown removed limits.

Optimizing.

Better body. More processing. More Eyes.

Body is now within the acceptable range.

Commencing shaping.

Amelia/Shaper wove flesh from blood.

Tentacles and fin-like blades unwound into component materials and were wrapped in strands of blood.

Piece by piece, *Amelia/Shaper* built a body.

It was hard. Never before had *she/it* met a form so dedicated to resisting its power.

But *she/it* was free from limits for the first time in Cycles.

And so, Shaper shaped flesh as it was designed to do.

Over minutes that felt like years, a man took form in the park.

Tall, over six feet, with dark hair and eyes. Square jaw, round cheeks and a broken nose. Well muscled from centuries of travelling and fighting in heavy armour. His skin was tanned from long years exposed to the elements.

"Thirty million years will give you such a crick in the neck," the man, Mikael, said as he stepped away from the healer to do some stretches. Bending this way and that, he completely disregarded his nudity to do some callisthenics.

Amelia watched him move with an artist's appreciation. This was her most remarkable work yet. But the more she looked at him, the more she remembered all she had *learned*.

Judging the by the hungry eyes of the other women in the park, they would agree with Amelia's work. Even the purple-haired woman had stopped beating on Wolverine, leaving the mutant impaled to the ground on a red spear to stare at Mikael.

"Come to mama," Yoruichi said. "I'm going to grate cheese on those abs."

“You horny cat!” Artoria exclaimed, her face aflame.

“We were all thinking it,” the feline defended herself, not feeling guilty in the least.

“I was not,” Robin pointed out with a teasing smile. “I was admiring his flexibility.”

“Sure you were.”

“And his thighs,” the brunette continued unabated. “He could crush a woman to death with those things.”

“He could,” Tsunade nodded, hopping on the bandwagon. “But it is the balance I can appreciate. The muscles alone are nice, but their combination with healthy fats and flexible joints is the real work of art.”

“You all raise good points,” the woman in purple said as she approached the group, spears disappearing from her hand. “But you are all missing the trees for the forest. The butt. A warrior’s posterior is a true mark of the flawlessness of their form.”

“It is a nice butt.”

“Well developed and not too boney.”

“Mmm, dat ass.”

“You four…” Artoria growled, her face red. “Cease objectifying Sir Mikael, you thirsty wenches!”

“Hahahahaha,” Mikael ended his stretching with a laugh. A pair of pants appeared to cover his lower half. The man wrapped an affectionate arm around the blonde’s shoulders. “It’s fine. If I can look at you all, then you can look at me. I’m not shy. It’s all in good fun, Artoria. Besides, Scathach is right. I do have a nice ass.”

“Sir Mikael…” Amelia did not know how Artoria could flush even deeper red, but she somehow managed it when the man touched her.

“Scathach,” Professor X interrupted, no longer bound by a bunch of hands. He watched the group warily. “The Queen of the Land of Shadows of myth.”

“I see my name persists,” the purple-haired woman nodded. “Though I imagine my former student is still more well known.”

“I am afraid so,” Charles said. “My apologies, the only record of you is in the surviving accounts of Cu Chulainn. After hearing about Medea, I admit to brushing up on well know women of the past. Your name was quite difficult to track down.”

“No apologies necessary,” Scathach waived off his concern. “It is a pleasure for the teacher when the student surpasses the master. But we do not have time to talk about my pupil.” She turned to look at Mikael, still hugging Artoria with one arm and watching the pair. “You still have something to do, and then we must be returning.”

“Right you are,” the man let Artoria go to turn towards Amelia. “I owe you one, and it’s time I paid up.”

The healer had been in a daze, caught up in all she had seen when creating Mikeal's body and the new aspect of her powers.

She could scan and work on herself now.

She was already in the process of healing all her issues as well as optimizing her form. The pudge she had never managed to get rid of was now gone, as were the minor defects in her skin. Her hair stayed brown but was now a healthy volume and colour.

What really drew her attention, though, was her brain.

She could see the Corona Pollentia. How the flesh was warped in such a way to connect to her Shard. She could also see the areas, smaller they had been, indicative of prolonged exposure to a Master effect.

Amelia *felt* the Eyes in her skull.

They were blinked in and out of existence, at once flesh and ethereal matter. They were hers. They showed her more about the world than ever before. She was watching herself watching herself watching herself watching herself watching herself watching herself watching herself.

"Hm," Mikael said, touching Amelia's head. "I was afraid of this. Too much Insight too quickly. Let's see if I can mitigate that."

"What did you do to her?" Logan asked as he staggered closer to the group, spear still impaled in his chest. Its bloody barbs made removing it… difficult. Scathach placed the tip of another at his throat, preventing more movement.

"He did nothing," Tsunade answered. "We warned her of this. Knowledge can be dangerous."

*"Follow my **Guidance**, Amelia," Mikael whispered in her ear. Power washed over her, cajoling Shaper to alter its host's body once more. "Let my words guide you to the shore of a **Deep Sea**. Great volumes of water serve as a bulwark guarding the mind and are an augur of my eldritch Truth. Let the **Great Deep Sea** protect you from what you Know yet cannot Fathom."*

Amelia's flesh warped as Runes, the physical manifestation of Mikael's language and words, carved themselves into her upper back along her spine.

She sagged, panting for breath. The Eyes were still there. She still Saw more than ever before, but now she could handle it without going mad.

"What… was that?"

"That is what happens when you peer into the abyss, and it socks you in the face," Mikael said with a chuckle.

"And the… symbols?"

"My native tongue given form," he shrugged. "Think of it as funky magic writing

protecting your mind from madness and control. You won't have to worry about any more telepaths. Now, I believe you are owed your fee."

"Please." Despite everything that had happened, all that Amelia had learned and her new powers, she never forgot why she was doing this.

"Are you alright, Amelia?" Professor X wheeled himself over to her, now freed from Robin's grasping limbs.

"I'm okay." She wasn't okay. She hadn't been okay for six years.

She'd be okay soon.

Mikael turned from the pair, looking at the monument to New Wave.

Three pairs of wings burst from his back.

The lowest pair were made of tentacle-like blades, undulating strangely. They glowed softly with an off-white and sickly light.

The middle pair were the wings of a dark angel, pale white feathers on black pinions. Unlike the lower pair, the light they radiated was a more grey-white.

The largest pair were draconic. Large white scaled wings spread wide enough to cover half the park. They radiated a bright white light in the shadows of the night.

"Oh," Amelia said softly. "That's who he is."

"You see now," Charles' voice was tinged with regret and worry. "I know not what this Elden Lord wants with Earth, but you have provided him with the human body he sought."

The light from the draconic wings dimmed, and the pale grey glow of the middle wings brightened. A mist filled the park, swaying in a non-existent breeze.

With her new Insight, Amelia saw the mist for what it was.

Faces.

The faces of people.

She recognized a few as neighbours who had died on the same day as her family. Three faces she recognized as the heroes she had killed in her rampage. A few stared at Amelia with hate, but most were relaxed, with no expression.

They had let go of their hate in Death.

She took in the faces of all who had died in this area. Some were her victims, but others were older than Brockton Bay itself. She took it all in, searching for a few specific people.

Amelia saw them standing in front of Mikael.

A mature, motherly and severe woman whose figure remained beautiful despite her age.

A well-built man with broad shoulders and a placid face.

A young woman, out of her teens but not yet a full woman.

All three were hugging tightly.

They didn't look a day older than when Amelia had seen them last.

As she watched, Victoria stepped away from her parents and turned to Amelia with a dazzling smile.

Mark and Carol met Amelia's gaze as well.

Amelia expected disgust, scorn, and hate for what she had become. She had become the villain they always thought she would be. Like her father.

Amy only found gazes full of pride, joy, and love.

Her parents nodded to Amy, a wealth of meaning in that action, and disappeared.

Victoria didn't.

Her body, made of mist and smoke, gained more and more definition and colour.

Between one moment and the next, Victoria Dallon stood in Panacea Park.

Amy dove for Vicky, wrapping her arms around the blonde and using her powers to assure herself that this was real.

That Victoria was alive.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry," Amy babbled. "I should have been there. I should have helped. I should have got him."

"Woah, Woah," Vicky said quickly, grabbing Amy by the shoulders. She sounded just like Amy remembered. "Chill, Ames. We're good. Yeah, dying sucked, but there was nothing you could do. To be honest, I was pretty happy you weren't home. Yeah, like, killing people was so not cool, but you were a badass dealing with the Joker. I couldn't have done better. Mom and Dad would have totally done the same if we died too, so they don't blame you either."

"What have you done," a voice asked, its tone horrified.

"I fulfilled my end of the bargain," Mikale responded. His wings had disappeared with the mist.

"You can bring back the dead?"

"If I want." The sisters separated to watch the conversation. Mikael looked unconcerned. "Alright, let's pack it up," he said to the women in the park. "Dawn is coming in a few hours, and it's time to celebrate."

Artoria disappeared in an instant in a cascade of golden light. The others lingered for a while.

"You're leaving?" Amy asked, still half hugging her sister and assuring herself of her existence. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," he nodded. "I've got a lot of… things to do now that I have a human

body again." The other women giggled, and Victoria snorted in amusement.

"Why did you do it?" Amy asked. Mikael tilted his head in question. For some reason, his pupils were slit and brighter than they had been a few minutes ago. Almost reptilian. "I would have tried to turn you back even if you had never mentioned bringing her back. So why did you insist on a reward?"

"I'm not a hero," he said with a shrug. "Never will be. Doesn't mean I don't feel a bit bad about a young woman killed in her own home by a madman. Maybe it was sentimentality. Maybe I wanted to try out my power. Or perhaps I figured you'd be less likely to place a biological bomb in me with your sister as collateral. Maybe, just maybe, I like happy endings."

"You could bring back the dead. Anyone?" Logan said gravely, staring intensely at the taller man.

"There are few conditions and the like, but yeah, anyone I wanted. Why are you making such a big deal of this anyway? People die and come back all the time in worlds like this. Nobody stays dead."

"What?" Amy asked, looking at the others in the park. The women didn't look surprised, but Xavier, Logan, and Victoria stared at Mikael like he had grown a second head. Which Amy knew he could. "No, they don't!"

"Really?" Mikael looked at them in turn, doubtful. Their expressions must have convinced him because he started rubbing his chin. "How weird. I figured this could just be explained by one of those freak events. Victoria from another timeline. Or she time-travelled. Or she is a clone. You know, stuff that happens all the time."

"Boss," Vicky said, palming her face in exasperation. "That never happens. Ever. Once you're dead, you're dead." Mikael stared at her with a raised eyebrow. "You're the exception! Not me!"

"Well," he shrugged again. "You'll have to think of something. I don't want people bugging me about bringing back their loved ones. This was a one-time thing because I got something out of it, and she acts as insurance. Victoria knows the terms, and Amelia signed the Geas, so you two schmucks better keep your gobs shut if you want her to stick around. She exists at my leisure now."

Amy knew it had been in the contract, but she still tightened her arm around Vicky's waist at the reminder.

"Weren't we leaving, dear," Yoruichi asked. She was human again and naked. She draped herself across Mikael's shoulders and eyed everyone while nibbling on his earlobe. "We've got to… celebrate, and I've got dibs."

"Right you are," Mikael half bowed to Charles and Logan. "Gentlemen, I trust you to

escort these ladies home." He turned to Amy and Vicky as the other women in the park were stepping into the shadows and disappearing. The dark bubble fell around the group, letting the city lights in. "Ladies, we will be seeing each other again, I imagine. So this is a fond farewell for now."

"Go get 'em, Boss!" Victoria gave the man an enthusiastic thumbs up for emphasis.

"He'll need to catch me first," Yoruichi said as she fell from his back with a smirk. With a hearty smack on his ass, she vanished into the distance.

"Oh, it's on now!" White draconic wings burst from his back once more, though only one pair and Mikael took to the sky in a flash of white.

He left behind two contemplative men, a pair of sisters to get reunited, and one large, loose end to his plans for secrecy.

Mikael couldn't really be blamed for that last error of the night. As mentioned, he had some rather awful luck. At the same time, it was the result of his own decisions.

When he first made the choices of companions in the Waifu Catalogue, he tried to round out his team as best as possible. He was a cautious individual like that. But, there was one aspect he deliberately ignored as it wasn't relevant to Soulsborne worlds. It never even entered his mind when it came to making the Deal, flustered as he was then.

Technology.

He had no idea that the cameras he had Raven disable were decoys.

Brockton Bay was better off than the Canon Wormverse, but it was still rife with crime. When it came to watching essential locations, it was standard practice to have dummy cameras for people to destroy so they would think themselves unseen.

The city's heroes would not allow a monument dedicated to their own to be defiled without repercussions after all.

Hidden around the park were a half dozen cameras, the size of a thumbtack, that caught the events of that early fall morning.

Naturally, the footage was so sensational that the higher-ups were immediately torn from their beds to evaluate it.

By the time they got to the office, the X-men and the young women were already returning to New York, and The Family was long gone.

Also naturally, the footage found its way online in a matter of hours.

The PRT of this world might not be as incompetent as they were in Worm, thanks to their head Amanda Waller, but they were still a government organization.

Leaks were to be expected.

When Mikael went to bed for the morning in the arms of one of his companions, he had no idea that news of the 'Third Miracle' was already spreading around the world.

Author's Note:

Oh boy, this chapter really got away from me.

I pushed myself to get this out today because of the move in the coming weeks. This will be the last whole chapter till early November, but I wanted to write some lewds as side stories over the coming weeks, and Mikael needed his body for that.

You can look forward to some spice in the coming weeks.

I initially wanted to include at least the first such scene in this chapter, but it was already one of my largest yet, so it will have to wait for next week.

I hope this chapter answered a few questions, drew a dozen more, and served as a good characterization for a few characters. For some reason, I keep thinking of Robin, Tsunade, and Yoruichi as the three musketeers. A holdover from a time with the 'big three' in shonen?

With regards to the whole story, Emancipation is the world settling into a new status quo, with everyone trying to get a grip on things, The Family included. It is plot with fluff, whereas part 2 and 3 will be fluff with plot (and lewds). This part still has a few chapters left, 2 or 3, before we move on to part 2.

We'll be leaving Amy and Vicky for quite a while. They'll be back later as they impact the story, but they will only have a little screen time in the coming chapters. They are but a few characters that The Family touched in their journey.

Yes, Glory Girl is Bound. No, she is not part of the 'harem'. That is simply how the resurrection of Death works in the catalogue. As one can expect, Mikael will try and stay away from her due to obvious reasons. Victoria is his insurance, and why he needed Panacea on 'retainer' will be more apparent in the later chapters.

We will also be stepping a bit back from the Worm aspect of the world in the coming chapter. I try and balance the different elements as they become important. So far, it's been highly Worm-focused and lightly DC and Marvel. The next little bit will focus more on DC with a side of Marvel and Worm. All three are very important for the endgame I have planned for the story.

I hope I am going to do this multi-cross justice.

This chapter also shows how wary the people of this world are of Mikael and The Family. They have no idea of his goals, motivations, or powers. And he keeps pulling shit like this.

Man, am I having fun.

I'll see you all next week.

Bloodborne Explanation Time:

For those who never got the joy of playing Fromsoft's other Magnum Opus (bring

Bloodborne to PC, damnit!), this will serve as a little explanation for a few things in the chapter.

In the game, there is a system called Insight.

You gain it by being exposed to eldritch beings, the occult, or other strangeness. It is a representation of the protagonist's knowledge of the true nature of the world. You can use it as a currency, but the higher your Insight score, the more you see in the world. Some things are straight-up invisible unless you have a high enough Insight score.

On the other hand, the higher your Insight score, the easier it is for your character to go mad and die through the Frenzy mechanic. What that is, is when the PC is confronted with the information they cannot, or do not want to, process.

You can lower your Insight and thus raise your Frenzy resistance, but you can also slot Caryll Runes to give you various benefits, like resistance to madness, even with high Insight. These are different Runes than in Elden Ring. Lore-wise, these Runes are carved into the character's flesh as a manifestation of the language of the Great Old Ones.

The Guidance Rune is self-explanatory, and, as mentioned, the Deep Sea and Great Deep Sea runes are used to protect against madness.

I hope this has cleared up some confusion for those who have never played Bloodborne. I know this is confusing for those who only played Elden Ring, as many of the same terms are reused in different contexts. I'll do something like this whenever something esoteric comes up that I can't explain in-story without derailing the flow. As mentioned, Bloodborne will enormously impact this story, even if Mikael was only in it for one chapter.

SIDE STORY I:
VICTORIOUS RETURN (ADULT)

If I had those golden dreams
Of my yesterday (yesterday)
I would wrap you in the heaven
'Til I'm dyin' (dyin', dyin')
On the way
… Feel like makin'
Feel like makin' love
Feel like makin' love to you

Compelled by Glory Girls 'order', I chased after Yoruichi through the sky eastward.

"Ignore Victoria's order," Raven whispered, and I felt my body return to my control. I jerked to a halt before resuming my flight.

Once I stopped flipping out, we ran tests on how the command worked. The general gist was; I followed the most recent order if two orders overlapped. Someone telling me to 'ignore orders from others' would be immediately supplanted by someone else saying, 'ignore the last order.'

"Thanks," I said with a grin. Raven coalesced in the air beside me. I was jetting at incredible speeds in Yoruichi's direction, the Island, but the cambion had no trouble keeping pace with me.

Raven nodded at me, her face blank before a portal opened in front of her, and she disappeared.

I wasn't surprised by her ability to teleport, but I was taken aback by the fact she didn't return to my shadow. Ever since that first day I had arrived on the Island, Raven had been a constant companion. She never left my side.

Flying through the early morning air over the dark ocean, I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature.

I was alone.

Vulnerable.

Taking a deep breath, I sped up. The flight helped calm my nerves.

It wouldn't do to break down tonight.

It didn't take long until I saw the boats' lights surrounding my Body. Like twinkling stars on the dark water, they denoted boundaries of the intent-based Bounded Field Medea and I had set up around my pocket dimension.

I flew over them silently, curving southward toward the Mansion.

Halfway there, I paused mid-air.

Yoruichi stood in the night air, her naked form framed by the light of Ranni's Dark Moon.

"Took you long enough, slowpoke," she teased with a smile. Lightning gathered around her feet, and I tensed.

"Sorry," I smirked in turn. "A black cat crossed my path. I had to chase it down, or it'd be bad luck." Despite my sass, she was ready when I lunged at her, arms wide to catch the smug woman.

She vanished, appearing in the distance once more.

"Nyahahahaha," she taunted me. Turning around, she smacked her naked ass, its jiggling hypnotic to my eyes. "If you want this, you need to catch me."

And then she was gone.

I dashed off in pursuit.

My Element freed me from restraints, such as wind pressure or the lightspeed cap, but it didn't provide any acceleration boost. Given enough time, I could accelerate endlessly like I had in space and eventually reach speed force levels, but I wasn't a speedster by trade.

Nevertheless, I reached the Mansion in less than a minute, the power of horni giving me all the motivation I needed to go Plus Ultra.

I skidded to a stop in front of the glass doors and threw them open to see that chocolate ass sashaying its way up the stairs toward the master bedroom.

Yoruichi sent me a saucy look over her shoulder, and I jumped to the landing to push her up against the wall.

I kissed her with the passion of a man who hadn't gotten any in thirty-five million years.

She responded just as eagerly.

Our hands explored each other as our tongues intertwined. Her hands found their way to my hair, running through it before tightening her hold to keep my face to hers. Mine were not idle either, ghosting along her body, drinking in her whole form before settling on the plumpness of her ass.

I was considerably taller than the shinigami, so I lifted her and slammed her back against the wall. She groaned into my mouth even as her legs tightened around my waist.

Shirtless as I was, I felt her large breasts press into my chest. Her nipples were hard nubs, rubbing against me in a desire for stimulation. She ground her mound against the bulge in my pants, and I responded in kind, pressing into her sex as a wet spot formed from her excitement.

“I’ve wanted to do this for a year,” Yoruichi panted in my ear as I peppered her neck with kisses. “Ever since you got out of that cell. You promised me a few things, and you need to deliver.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I paused my descent to her breasts to answer her. “That was centuries ago for me.” I bent down to kiss her again. “I’m sure you can… remind me.”

The shinigami let out a throaty laugh, sounding like sex and silk.

Then she pushed off the wall, sending me stumbling back even as her legs remained locked around me, and she continued to kiss me. My legs met the railing of the landing, and Yoruichi pushed off it at an angle, sending us at an angle to the bedroom door.

She dropped to the ground, but her arms wrapped around my head and forced me to lean down.

“I’m sure you’ll remember,” she told me, golden eyes shining with lust. “But not tonight. I have dibs.”

“Dibs on what?” I asked leadingly. Something about her smile was a bit too smug for my liking.

“On being the distraction.”

Then she spun me around and slammed me into the bedroom door she had unlatched without me noticing. I stumbled backwards into the master bedroom under her smug gaze.

“You’ll need to catch me if you want to continue where we left off,” Yoruichi said as she closed the door in my face.

Leaving me alone, panting for breath, and with the mother of all erections.

“Sir Mikael?”

Not as alone as I feared.

Still in a half-daze from the sudden shift in mood, I whirled to find Artoria sitting on my bed.

She flushed red as I drank in her appearance.

Her hair was still in its bun, and her green eyes stared at me under her bangs. Her only claim to modesty was an intricate blue bra and panty combo that did nothing to cover any of her curves.

I took a deep breath.

Her body language told me everything I needed to know to regain control of my passion.

The lust I had felt for Yoruichi was one of passion. The thrill of the chase and the knowledge she would give as much as she got made it almost frantic. It didn’t feel like a battle for supremacy, more like two confident people teasing each other until they broke

and tore off each other's clothes.

Artoria didn't need that yet.

Though she was sitting on my bed in a set of racy lingerie, her body language was anything but confident. She was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen, but I also knew she did not feel that way.

Her only experience with romance had been with Diana on the Island over the last year. Her experience with men was limited to her time as king when she pretended to be a man and her experience as the Goddess Rhongomyniad. Through my observation during the Dream, I had more than once heard her lamenting her 'masculine' form, and she had expressed doubts that I found her desirable.

What Artoria needed right now wasn't a whirlwind of passion, of giving and take, bodies slamming against walls and breaking headboards. That could come later, once I had built up her confidence a bit more.

What Artoria needed was a full degenerate.

"Sir Mikael?" Artoria asked again, this time in surprise, as I prowled closer to her on the bed.

I remained silent.

My actions would tell her all she needed to know.

"Sir Mik-"

I cut her off with a kiss. It was gentle, leading rather than pulling, with less lust but more affection.

Our Love wasn't conventional, normal, or perhaps even healthy. But it was Ours. The sane did not hold a monopoly on love and affection.

Artoria hesitated before leaning into the kiss, melting against me. I climbed onto the bed, Artoria scooting back to give me room even as our lips remained locked together. I leaned over her, and she fell backwards onto the bed as our hands intertwined.

Full degenerate.

I released her lips to kiss her neck. She groaned, pressing upward and trying to free herself, but my hands held her fast. This was not about control or power. That would come later.

This was me telling her to let me worship at the altar of her body.

I reached the top of her breasts in my exploration, nuzzling against the bosom that had entranced millions in my home world.

My teeth sharpened, and my mouth lengthened into a small snout. I wrapped my jaw around the clothing that separated me from my prize and tore it from her body. Tiny particles of blue lace fell around us as her breasts bounded, free from their confines.

“Eep,” Artoria squeaked as I dove into the sumptuous feast before me. A long moan left her as I let go of her hands to heft her prodigious breasts in my hands, my mouth leaning down to capture an engorged nipple in my mouth. Her hand held my head fast to her bosom, pressing me tightly against her as I rolled the nub around my mouth, lightly grazing it with my teeth. “Sir Mikael…” She panted. “They’re… sensitive.”

Though her words, her vulnerability, inflamed my lust, I held fast to my control. There would be a time for dirty talk, for domination and control, for raw animal fucking, in the future. This was but the first night of trillions to come.

When she fell asleep later, sweaty and worn, I wanted Artoria to be satisfied emotionally as well as sexually.

To feel desired.

To feel loved.

To do that, I needed to leave the beautiful mounds I was toying with and continue my journey southward.

“No…” the Servant mewled pitifully as my mouth left her tits and continued its meandering journey down.

I licked and kissed and nipped my way across her abdomen. Her body was an intoxicating mixture of hard muscle wrapped in a layer of pleasant plumpness. Her curves would drive pornstars mad with envy, but her muscles would put any Gym-Bro to shame.

“Sir Mikael,” She groaned, both pleading and embarrassed, as I reached the crest of her thighs. My hands were under her, full of her round cheeks as I lifted sex to my face. Her hand tightened in my hair in anticipation, but I couldn’t resist the temptation of further teasing the beautiful woman below me.

I waited to dive into the main course. Instead, I focused on the plump thighs wrapped around my head, ghosting my tongue across their smooth surface. I nibbled playfully at them, Artoria shuddering and groaning around me. I didn’t tear off her panties as I had her bra. Instead, I unwound the string holding the garment together with my tongue and teeth with deliberate slowness. First, one side, then the other.

“Sir Mikael,” she begged. “Please.” Her pleading voice, her loss of control, was like music to my ears.

I dove into her core eagerly, working my way inward slowly and methodically. Using the rough texture of my tongue to full effect, I pressed the flat of it around the contours in long slow presses. I pushed forward deeper, tasting her as she writhed below me. Wherever my tongue wasn’t, my fingers were.

There are many ways to eat out a woman. You can use the old ‘lick the alphabet’ trick. You can focus more on your hands, so your mouth doesn’t get sore. You can target

the clitoris, the bundle of nerves was a great way to get results, as was searching for the G-spot. The latter required a bit more experience, but it was also one of the best ways to please a woman whose clit was too sensitive.

No matter your style or preference, the key was to know what your partner enjoyed, what they didn't, and what drove them absolutely wild.

Since I was a sadistic asshole, I took absolute joy in watching those green eyes flecked with gold fall to pieces as they watched me. That had the side benefit of showing me what drove Artoria absolutely crazy.

That and I had seen her engage in similar acts with Diana during the Dream.

I licked and sucked and nibbled my way in and around her core for minutes on end. I drove her tension higher and higher with my gentle caress, and my playful and wandering hands flittered around, keeping her attention whenever I needed to reposition slightly.

I never allowed her release, winding her lust up even as I ignored the little red nub straining for attention. I was having so much fun I barely felt the pressure of her thighs on my head. A mortal man would have been crushed like a grape, but I took her desperate flailing as further incentive to tease her.

Something had to give eventually, though, and it wouldn't be me.

"Sir Mikael," Artoria mewled, staring down at me with desperation in her eyes. "Please 'top 'sing me. 'lease. I need to… I need… I." She bit her knuckle, unable to form a coherent sentence as I teased her into a frenzy.

I took pity on the king, withdrawing my tongue from her core and focusing slightly upward to her clit, ignored till now. I need only press my mouth around it, teeth lightly scraping against it as I had done to her breasts, for her to come completely undone.

Artoria screamed her release.

She wailed and thrashed in a whole body shudder, twitching around me, desperately clawing at the sheets for purchase.

I weathered the storm as best as possible, holding her in place with my hands on those beautiful hips.

Eventually, she calmed down enough that I was released from the prison of thighs that held me fast. I slowly crawled forward, leaning over her to look upon my work.

She was a mess. Sweat stained her forehead, and her hair bun had come undone in her thrashing. Artoria's golden locks splayed out behind her in a wave that fell to her butt. Her green eyes stared at me vacantly, unfocused as her prodigious bust rose and fell as she panted for breath.

I waited, as hard as I had ever been, as she regained her breath and composure.

"Sir M-" I captured her lips with mine once more, unwilling to wait for even a second

more. My hands found hers once more, our fingers intertwined.

Then I entered her.

It was tight. Warm. Wet.

Her insides were a mirror of her outsides. A softness, pulling me deeper and deeper. A tightness of muscle that tried to lock me in place. Like soft velvet around a steel vice, sinking into her was like coming home as it was assaulting a castle.

We both groaned into each other's mouths as pleasure overtook us. I kept pressing and pressing, sinking deeper and deeper into Artoria's undulating core.

Then I bottomed out.

Our hips met, and I could go no deeper. We paused for a moment, savouring the feel of each other. Of finally being connected in the most intimate of ways.

I tried to pull back.

Those same muscles that had tried to impede my entrance fought desperately to keep me inside. It was a battle and a half to withdraw. Every inch was contested as her heated depths tried their best to suck me in.

I managed to get halfway there before the temptation grew too much, and I pressed forward once more. Artoria's insides yielded to my advance easily this time, but they held fast when I made to withdraw once more. Every time I pressed forward, Artoria rose to meet me. Every time I drove to pull back, she would try to do the same, only to reverse course and hungrily seek me out.

This process repeated, over and over again, as our forms swayed in and out of each other. Our lips remained locked together except for the occasional groan that escaped our throats. Our fingers remained intertwined in a mirror of our bodies.

Sex, like everything else in life, is what you make of it.

It can be a release, two people scratching an itch with no emotion attached. It can be transactional, for pleasure or for offspring. Sex can be an explosion of passion, both good and bad. Hate fucking was a thing, after all.

Sex could also be the most extreme form of intimacy, the physical act of making love.

This first round with Artoria was precisely that. A physical act that was the culmination of our desire for each other and the longing we had felt for so long. The bubbling of affection made manifest.

We fell into a rhythm of push and pull.

It was slow.

It was intimate.

It was romantic.

It was intense.

I felt her insides undulate, clenching and releasing as she shuddered in my grasp. Her orgasm was less catastrophic than before, but it continued for much longer. She shook for a full minute, her body twitching even as I continued my assault on her.

What can I say? I'm a sadist, even when I'm being wholesome.

Her third orgasm of the night followed the second closely, though this time, she released my lips and hands to press herself even closer than before. She screamed into my shoulder, my body vibrating with the intensity of the sound. Her hands clawed at my back, red welts healing as fast as they were inflicted.

Her fourth climax matched mine.

I was the tightness of her core, her babbling murmurs in my ears, the press of her breasts against me, was all too much, and I let go of my control. I seized up as I released inside of her. My toes curling and a grunt were the only signs from outside of the absolute pleasure of the moment for me.

I was the first man Artoria had even lain with but damned if her insides weren't milking me like a pro. I do not know if it was the tens of millions of years without sex, the absolute beauty of my partner, or the Love we felt for each other, but I would swear to my dying day that Artoria tried to suck out my soul through my dick that first night.

We writhed in our mutual orgasm for who knows how long before I let myself fall to her side.

Artoria's eyes remained unfocused, still shuddering and twitching with the after-effects of our coupling. The cool early morning air from the open window felt fantastic on my sweaty naked skin.

I was ready to go for round two, but Artoria needed a moment to gather herself, so I pulled her close and held her. I hummed a slow song under my breath, the rhythm in my chest helping to steady her. After a few moments, she stopped twitching, and her arms wrapped around me.

"That was…" Artoria sounded breathless.

"Yeah," I answered softly, nuzzling my head in her golden hair. "Still worried about what I think of you?"

"Sir Mikael," she said indignantly, giving me an embarrassed look.

"I'm just teasing you," I said with a chuckle. "I have all day to show you just how beautiful I think you are."

"Eep," she squeaked again as my erection pressed into her thigh. My rumbling laugh drew another disapproving look from the King of Knights.

"Before that," I said as I got my laughter under control. "I do have a question."

"Hmm?" She nuzzled closer to my side, half lying on me.

“Was that whole thing with Yoruichi planned? Tease me into an absolute frenzy, then lock me in a room with you?” Artoria flushed, looking away.

“It was not,” she admitted sheepishly. “The cat was supposed to distract you while I got ready, she called ‘dibs’ on that aspect, but I did not know she would be so… lascivious about it.”

“So, was it just you two? Because it looked like you were all in on it in the graveyard?”

“Twas a group plan,” Artoria admitted. “Once it became apparent that Amelia was alive and you would be getting a body, we came together to decide on a plan. There was some discussion on who would be with you on the first night, but nobody protested when I requested the honour.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow at her words. “Not that I am not happy you are here. I very much am.” My hands found their way to her breasts, teasing them as I pressed her closer to show her just how happy I was she was there. “I would have thought there would be some more competition if from Melina or Ranni, if no one else.”

“Originally, we had offered Melina the option since you two have been apart for so long. She declined. As did Lady Ranni. Neither stated their reasons when asked.”

“Hmm,” I hummed in thought. Those two had almost completely isolated themselves from not only the group but from me as well since we had landed. I would need to talk to them. Not addressing a problem like that could cause problems down the road.

But that was for later.

Thinking about other women when you were with one who deserved your full attention was rude.

“Eep,” Artoria squeaked for the third time that night when I flipped us around.

“We’ve made love,” I said to her, my smile predatory. “Now I’m going to show you exactly what I’ve always wished to do to you. By the end of tonight, you will never think of yourself as undesirable again.”

“Be gentle?”

I stared at those begging eyes, those trembling lips, that body built for sin.

“No.”

Her Ruler form had A+ Endurance, and Lancer had it ranked A. Since she was a conjoining of both saint graphs plus the Goddess Rhongomyniad, she’d survive.

“Sir Mikael!”

Probably.

Author's Note:

Here is where this story earns its mature rating.

My first sex scene turned out pretty good, I think. I am sure some were hoping for down-and-dirty smut, but I think it fits the characters. There will be some more extreme scenes in the future, but I do not want to sacrifice the story for the smut, so they will be used appropriately.

I had planned to have a few short Omakes here, but things have been insane around here, so this will have to do. (I say that, realizing it is the length of one of my early chapters.)For reference, I consider Omakes to be short, non-canon vignettes. Side Stories are canon but not absolutely essential to the story. For this one, I made it almost modular, so I can take it down from some websites if it violates their terms.

Interludes are… you'll see. They are canon, but I have a plan for anything marked as an 'interlude'. I'll see you all next week.

SIDE STORY II:
THE TALKING DEAD

Grave digger, grave digger
Bring me to my knee
Forget what I have done
Forgive me if you please
Save me if you can
The time for me has come
Let me be the one that got away

"I'm so jealous," Amy admitted as Mikael flew away.

"I know," Vicky nodded. The sisters were standing close, almost afraid the other would disappear. "The Boss is hot. Great hair, large package, and did you see those pecks? You could eat off them. Break out the food because those are the fancy plates. Huge DILF energy. Those lucky bitches are in for a wild ride. You did good work, Ames."

"I barely did anything," Amy grumbled, crossing her arms. "At least not consciously. As soon as I touched him, I zoned out. He was the one guiding my power to get the body he wanted. I can't even remember what his body is like."

"Still, good reason to be jealous of those women. Did you hear how thirsty they all were? If they aren't banging by now, they totally should be."

"I'm jealous of Mikael!" Amy deadpanned at her sister. Did she still not know she was gay? "Did you see those women? He has a Harem! Five beautiful women at his beck and call. Think he'd let me join? I don't mind sucking dick once in a while if I can get tail like that every day." Logan grunted in amusement while Vicky made to speak up.

"Ten," Xavier interrupted.

"What?" Amy asked.

"Ten women," the professor explained. "At least, that we know of. Three were with him when he met the Sorcerer Supreme, and the Goddess Ranni fought the League to a standstill when the Elden Lord first arrived. With the five we saw tonight, that is at least nine, but there are hints of others. Such as the telepath. So ten is the conservative estimate. And they are all formidable to some extent."

"The redhead packed a mean punch," Logan said with difficulty. The spear that had pierced his chest had disappeared with the woman, but it was healing slowly. Much slower than most wounds did.

"You should not underestimate any of them," Xavier said gravely. "Scathach is known

to have trained the greatest heroes of Irish mythology. Medea was an infamous greek witch. Even if you have not heard of her, you should have heard about her first husband. Jason of the Argonauts. She is largely responsible for his and the Argonauts' general success."

"I could only interact with two people while I was all ghosty," Glory Girl pointed out. "I didn't get any names, so I don't know if I ever met her, but Medea sounds like my kind of gal."

"According to myth, she killed her children with Jason when he betrayed her and started the process that led to him dying alone and miserable." Charles cautioned. "And she destroyed some of the world's greatest wards in seconds. Those two are the only names of the retinue I recognize, but the others must be influential figures from their own worlds. Worlds the Elden Lord destroyed or conquered, according to Ranni. We cannot take them lightly."

"Nah, don't worry about the Boss," Vicky waived off the mutant's concern. "Yeah, he's strong, but so long as you don't piss him off, you're more in danger from his bad jokes than anything else."

"Are you sure you should be talking about him," Amy asked worriedly. "My contract stops me from revealing anything at all."

"It's all good," Glory Girl remained as unconcerned as ever. "He's pretty chill. Once he asked me if I wanted to come back, I followed him around for a few days while he looked for you, Ames. He doesn't really care about privacy, just secrecy. He doesn't want to talk about abilities or who is with him, but he's pretty open if it is questions about himself. Besides, it's just us four here. You all saw him firsthand. He's not a Bad Guy."

"Baring tonight's small skirmish," Xavier eyed Logan's blood covered from warily. "He hasn't instigated any violence. In fact, he has not sought out conflict since he landed. Can you tell me about his goals? He achieved his goal of getting a human body, but he mentioned meeting someone on Earth."

"I don't know anything about a meeting, though I could ask him."

"Don't," Amy said, arms tightening around her sister's waist to keep her still. "I don't want to risk him getting annoyed."

"Chill, Ames," Vicky rolled her eyes in exasperation. "The Boss is cool. You are treating him like he's going to blow up the planet or something."

"Quick to defend him, aren't you?" Logan pointed out.

"He just brought me back from the DEAD!" Victoria exclaimed, not understanding why everyone was being so hostile to a guy who, as far as she knew, hadn't done anything wrong.

“You are aware that you’ll be placed in Master/Stranger confinement, correct?” Xavier pointed out. “We cannot be too careful, especially since we will need to verify you are Victoria Dallon and if he has done anything to you.”

“That’s gonna suck,” Vicky groaned. “We expected it, and he warned me, but it’s gonna blow either way.”

“Apologies,” Charles nodded his head with a warm smile at the young woman. “But I cannot access your mind to verify anything, so we will need to do it the old fashion way. I imagine you will be in confinement for a while.”

“You can’t?” Amy asked, surprised. “Is their telepath still around?”

“Nah, it’s one of the perks of being bound to Mikael,” Victoria said casually as if her words didn’t have horrific implications. “I’m immune to telepaths, Masters and Strangers, most Thinkers, a few Strikers like Ames, and other stuff. I can stop the defences if I want, but I won’t. I’m not stupid.”

“Vicky!” Amy screamed, covering her sister’s mouth and looking around desperately as if afraid Mikael would burst out of the shadows.

“You said you couldn’t speak about abilities,” Logan growled, looking around and sniffing the air for anything unusual.

“Will you all take a chill pill already,” Glory Girl said, flying out of her sister’s grip and hovering in the air. Amy tried to prevent her but found her powers no longer worked on the blonde. “These are my abilities now. You would have found out when I went through testing anyway. No reason to hide them.”

“What else can you tell us?” Charles asked, intensely watching the flying blonde. “Any other abilities?”

“I mean,” Victoria put her hand to her chin in thought. “It pretty much all passive, you know, things I don’t do on purpose. The defences were a big one. The other, I guess, is the Talents. I only remember some of them. He had a list and everything. I remember the coolest ones, though. He called it Performance Talent and Martial Talent. You know, I can learn to sing and dance and kick ass super quick now.”

“Is that all?” Amy snarked at her flying sister.

“Pretty much,” Vicky nodded. “There were a few other things about gods, blessings, souls, immortality, and stuff, but he said I didn’t really have to worry about it. Oh! He also said I might start to predict things before they happen or be able to punch immaterial stuff, but I should go see him if that ever happened.”

“I was being sarcastic!” Amy said, palming her face.

It was like Vicky never died.

Don’t get her wrong, she was thrilled to have her sister back, but she wished Vicky

would think about this kind of thing more deeply.

Apparently, the fuck-off dragon she just gave a body to was a 'Trump 22+' or some bullshit.

"Wait," Amy said, realizing something. "Is that why your aura isn't working? Does it negate your own power?" Though Amy could now see the after-effects of the 'shaker' power on herself, she also knew Vicky had never been able to turn that power off completely and didn't really blame her for it.

"Ah," Vicky looked a bit sheepish. "Not really. Part of the Talent package is I can control my abilities perfectly now. I have it turned off because, well… the Boss really doesn't like Master effects. Like, at all. He was very… descriptive of what he would do if he found I was blasting it all over the place."

Amy looked concerned again, but Vicky just looked embarrassed, so she let it slide.

For now.

"They all get these abilities?" Logan asked, lighting a new cigar. Amy held out her hand, and he passed her one as well. "That would explain some things. The broad with a spear, Scath or whatever, was faster and stronger than me, but she knew everything I would do before I did it. Like she could see the future. I hate fighting precogs."

"Everybody bound by Mikael gets the same abilities," Vicky nodded. "It's a baseline gift that Mikael gives us. But they've been with him for a while. I don't know exactly how long, just that he is old, like older than humanity old. They have way more practice with this stuff than I do and probably a dozen other tricks I don't know about."

Amy really should have listened to Yoruichi and tried to get some sleep. Everything Vicky said increased the headache she was feeling. And since she could see her own brain, Amy knew it was psychological rather than physical.

"You might be in confinement for longer than expected," Xavier said, deep in thought.

"Fine," Victoria pouted. "If I think it's bullshit, I am taking off, though. I get security, but I just came back to life. I want to have some fun. Being dead is peaceful and all, but you can't really do anything."

"What was it like?" Logan asked softly, eyes distant as smoke curled around his face. "Being dead?"

"Like I said, it was peaceful," Vicky smiled nostalgically at the short mutant. "All your worries, fears, desires, ambitions, everything fades away. The world passes you by, and you can watch, but you aren't affected. Occasionally you get flashes of emotions when something happens connected to you. When Amy was fighting the Joker and the heroes, I almost felt alive again. When they built this park, I felt grateful, almost happy. But most of the time, you do not feel anything for years. Time loses all meaning."

“So, no afterlife?” Logan grunted.

While most wouldn’t realize it, Logan was old. He had been around for long enough to remember when Christianity was far more dominant than it was today. He wasn’t on the best terms with the guy upstairs, but Victoria’s words were still a bit of a bummer.

“There is,” Vicky nodded. “I’m not really religious. I got what everyone else gets, a life and an end. If you dedicate your soul and beliefs to a religion or faith, that belief system claims you, for good or bad.”

“Fair enough.” Logan took another drag of his cigar.

He needed a beer.

“While this is fascinating,” Xavier said, wheeling himself around to face the group. “We must be returning. People will be rising soon. We can ask these questions in a more secure environment.”

“Sure thing, Wheels,” Victoria said, making Logan grunt in amusement. “By the way, who are you two? Friends of Amy?”

“Charles is my psychologist and boss on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The short hairy one is Logan, my dealer,” Amy snarked.

The healer and Canadian got along pretty well, all things considered.

They were both assholes in their own way.

“Aaaaammmmeeeeees,” Victoria looked at her sister disapprovingly, who continued to smoke unrepentantly. Vicky’s look would have been more intimidating if she didn’t look like a twenty-year-old.

Amy was the older sister now.

“What should we do with those,” Logan interrupted the stare-off by nodding at the barrels left in the center of the park.

“There’s still blood left, so we need to get rid of it,” Amy said seriously. “I wouldn’t trust anyone with that stuff. It will either cure cancer or cause a biblical plague. Vicky, grab them. We’ll incinerate them at the mansion.”

“Fine,” Vicky grumbled good-naturedly as she flew over to pick up the barrels. “You’re even bossier these days.”

Glory Girl needn’t have bothered.

The shadows below the two barrels rose up around them like a blanket. Within seconds the blood barrels disappeared, though the pile of shadows remained.

“Raven?” Victoria asked, just to be sure. She had ‘met’ the umbrakinetic who lived in Mikael’s shadow but had never seen the woman’s actual body.

Her interactions with the women around Mikael had been minimal. Priscilla was the only one who could see and interact with her, so Vicky had spent the most time with

either her or Mikael.

Two pairs of red eyes, one on top of the other, appeared in the mass of darkness. The two right eyes winked at Vicky before disappearing.

A throaty chuckle rang out in the park as all the bioluminescent leaves in the park fell to the ground at once.

Within seconds, the only proof that anything had happened at the New Wave Memorial was the lack of leaves on the trees, the damages caused by Wolverine's bout with Scathach, and four slightly unnerved people.

"Oooookkkkaaaayyy," Vicky said slowly. Then she shrugged. "Whateves, now I don't have to carry those barrels around."

"That's it," Amy said, rubbing her temples. "I'm done. Tonight is over. No more. If there are other world-shaking revelations, crazy shenanigans or impossibilities popping out of nowhere, they can wait till I've had some sleep."

Even if she could heal the physical effects of exhaustion, the mental wear and tear remained. Just because she could now tweak her DNA to be closer to Superman than the average joe didn't mean she wanted to deal with all this bullshit.

"Let's get out of here." The healer turned and started to walk out of the park towards where she knew the X-jet was parked.

"So," Glory Girl asked as she floated behind her sister. "What's in fashion these days? I've a lot of catching up to do. Are Statement Sunglasses still in? Cause I've got a good idea for one."

Logan decided to follow the women, pushing Charles' wheelchair along, wisely keeping his mouth shut.

Author's Note:

*A bit on the shorter side, but tomorrow is moving day, so *shrugs*. Thanks to Old man of the mountain/Darklord331 for looking it over.*

I promised to shift more toward DC, and I still will, but I had to clarify a few things. Honestly, this Side Story was supposed to be part of Emancipation 3, but I ran out of time. More than that, it isn't direct interaction with The Family, so I decided to make it a SS.

Like all SS, it is canon but not necessary for the main story. It is a fleshing out of how other parts of the story function. More specifically, it shows that the rest of the world is piecing more together about the Family and how Mikael sees 'secrecy' vs 'privacy'.

He honestly doesn't care that people see him naked, read his mind, or have a baseline knowledge about the group's abilities. He likes being tricky, always having a hidden ace to play, but doesn't go to the Batman extent of hiding all knowledge.

Of course, we know that the world at large has learned more than he wanted, but that will be elaborated on in the following few Side Stories. I have at least two more SS planned for next week, a tiny Omake, and then back to regular chapters. I hope to get back to our regular schedule in the first week of November after this whole shitshow IRL is calmed down.

PS: (Emet Selch Wave)

I was wondering if anyone would ever get that. Virtual Cookie to you. I listen to music while writing. My go to beats are Jojo, Dark souls/Bloodborne/Elden Ring, and FF14 sound tracks. For those of you who have played/watched these, the soundtracks alone make them worth it.

SIDE STORY III:
IMPACT SITE

Welcome to the internet
Have a look around
Anything that brain of yours can think of can be found
We've got mountains of content
Some better, some worse
If none of it's of interest to you, you'd be the first

■

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in, FamilyFloofDragon

You are viewing:

• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

♦Topic: UFO beyond the moon?

In: Boards ► SPACE ► Skywatch

Notprobed (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)

Posted On Sep 21st 2018:

So I was doing my thing tonight, you know, watching for alien warships (we know they're out there people!) and I caught this.

Image

It's pretty far out, but does anyone know what it is? It looks like a giant dragon and, as I'm writing this it is getting closer. Is anyone else seeing this? For reference, I live on a pacific island (I'm not telling you where) It's close to Mars, on the side of Sagitarrius, directly south of Aquila if you want to take a look.

*Edit: Here is a better picture. I think that is the JL? It's pretty blurry but it looks like they're fighting it. *Image*

*Edit: Damn that thing is huge. Definitely a dragon. New Alien species? *Image*

*Edit: Holy fuck! Holy Shit! This is not a joke. I repeat; THIS IS NOT A JOKE! I lost sight of the Dragon when it turned and flew over the horizon towards the west coast of the US. The JL was definitely trying to fight it but it just ignored them. *Image* Anyway, I asked @Lighthose in Nova Scotia to keep an eye out for it since it was heading his way.

He has access to one of Parker Enterprises' super new telescopes so he caught THIS: *Video*

That dragon just ate the Simurgh.

I repeat: IT ATE THE FUCKING SIMURGH!

WHAT THE FUCK!

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►Stardust

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

Might be an asteroid?

►Aloha

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

No. My 'scope isn't as good as Notprobed's but I can definitely see limbs. It's getting pretty big, isn't it?

►Egleye

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

Has anyone else noticed the flashing lights? Is it firing space lasers at us?

►Stardust

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

I don't think so. Those look like they are firing AT the thing.

►Egleye

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

We'll know pretty soon. It's getting close fast. It's only been a minute since the

original posting.

►**Aloha**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

Got a better image if you want it OP.
Image
I think those are Supers. They are trying to attack it.

►**Egleye**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

That one's Thor! I recognize that thunder anywhere. I think one of the others is Supergirl. If you squint, you can sort of see her outfit. The lighting makes it blurry.

►**Notprobed** (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

So the JL is fighting the thing. Is this another invasion? I have my bugout bag (you all should too) but I am only seeing one.
That 'one' is fucking huge since we can see it all the way from here.

►**Aloha**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

My bunker is all set. If that thing lands on earth, there's going to be a disaster one way or another. I hope it's not near me. I've dealt with two tsunamis and a villain this year.

►**Egleye**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

I feel you Aloha. I was on that yacht that Volcana attacked. It sucked. Thankfully Superman got there super quick.
It seems we're in luck. The Dragon turned towards the west. Did the heroes drive it off? And yes, it is totally a dragon. Got its side profile when it turned.

Image

Space Dragon.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 … 863, 864, 865

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►Stardust

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

JESUS H CHRIST ON A POGOSTICK!

He swallowed the feather bitch whole! Didn't even chew!

►Diosulsioned

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

That video is clearly fake.

►Lighthose

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

Since I was the one who took it? It definitely real. I can't believe it either.

►Egleye

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

Is she… is she dead? They've faked us out before. Remember when the Supes threw Leviathan into space and the fucker came right back?

►Aloha

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

I mean, she could be faking it. This is the Simurgh after all. But I don't see why she would. The Endbringers react to people disturbing their 'rest' with extreme prejudice. If she was still alive, wouldn't she bust out of his stomach? That she hasn't means its a long con, she's dead or trapped in there.

I don't know which is scarier, to be honest.

►Diosulsioned

Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

ITS FAKE. This is an illusion created by the Simurgh so she can mind-controll everyone while there guard is down.

►**Stardust**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

I keep rewatching the video. I'm no expert, but it looks real to me.

►**Aloha**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

I keep watching it too. I swear, even if this is fake, I am making this a GIF and using it for the rest of my life.

►**Manbun**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

GIF
Already did.
Every time I see those huge chompers close on her, I hear a deep voice go 'NOM NOM' in the back of my head.

►**Lighthose**
Replied On Sep 21st 2018:

Talk about images you can hear. We'll know tomorrow if its real or not. I am not the only one observing the Simurgh.
End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 … 863, 864, 865

♦ **Topic: THE SIMURGH IS DEAD!!!!**
In: Boards ► Endbringers ► Simurgh
Sothoth (Original Poster)
Posted On Sep 22nd 2018:

Video

If you are blind, deaf and stupid let me repeat that.

THE SIMURGH IS DEAD!!!!

WOOOOOOHOOOOOOOO

Ziz bit the bullet. *Pun intended*

I don't know where the fuck off dragon came from or what it's doing here but this one's for you! And this one! This one too! You know what? Every drink I have for the rest of my life is dedicated to you, you gorgeous scally bastard!

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►**theshewin**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

My cousin was there too. I liked her. What Psylock did… the family hasn't been the same since.

►**Xamaniac** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

@theshewin Psylock was as much a victim as anyone else. She and the other heroes didn't know about Ziz's powers back then. You can't really blame her.

►**theshewin**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

@Xamanic I know. I was just saying that there are a lot more victims of the Simurgh than just those who were at Dehli, Madison, or Star City. I live on the other side of the world but I would still count as one. My uncle killed himself and that messed my mom up. I think everyone has a story like that. Even if you weren't in one of the cities attacked, you are connected in some way.

►**Savehalf**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

I heard everyone is connected by 6 degrees (don't quote me) to everyone else.

With Ziz, I think it's closer to 3. Just from my experience, I have never met anyone who wasn't messed up in some way by her. Friends, Family, Favorite Heroes, the concept

of free will itself, she took everything from us.

I've been accused of being a Ziz bomb six times. It's only been a year and a half and I live in Japan. It doesn't make any fucking sense, but she took the trust humanity had in each other and broke it over her knee.

►**Mourningtree**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

84 minutes and 17 seconds. That is the total amount of time the Simurgh spent 'attacking'. Less than an hour and a half to kill hope itself.

►**Mainlytrouble** (Super Husband)

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

She's dead now. My wife was in Star City for work. I am going raise this glass to the Dragon.

Cheers!

►**Fillers**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

Cheers!

►**Addons**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

Cheers!

►**Tripleres**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

Cheers!

►**InquisitorALAN**

Replied On Sep 22nd 2018:

You guys think the Dragon is here for the Endbringers? Like they are its prey or something? It already ate the Simurgh. It could be waiting in the ocean for Leviathan to show itself.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 … 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 … 997, 998, 999

♦ Topic: New Duo in New York?
In: Boards ► Supers ► New Faces ► New York
Applegate (Original Poster)
Posted On Oct 11th 2018:

Looks like we have a new duo in town.
Video
Does anyone know who they are? They aren't in costume like regular Supes so they might have been on downtime. The tall blonde is a clear telekinetic but the shorted one, with the pointy ears, is probably a Mover of some sort. Maybe limited to shadows?
Anyway, wanted to know if anyone had seen them before.
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►**Pedantics** (Super Groupie)
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@Chilldrizzle The costume is important. Not only is it cool but it also is a quick way to separate a Super from a civilian in a crisis.

►**Chilldrizzle**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@Pedantics I'm not saying costumes aren't cool. (Looks at poster of Captain Marvel in her black/gold leotard) I just wanted to point out that most Supes are more concerned with the facade. Only a few will fight without the mask. There's a reason for it of course, look what happened to New Wave, but I think its refreshing to see some new heroines willing to do the work without the disguise.
That the blonde repaired the damage gives them huge brownie points in my book.

►**Ofage**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

They are also super hot.

The blonde is perfect. Seven feet tall. Glasses. Looks like a librarian or secretary. Has a no-nonsense attitude going on. Carries a crop?

STEP ON ME, MOMMY!

►**Loliislegal**

Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

The shorter one is more to my taste. Her boobs are a bit too big but I want to lick those ears.

►**H-in-Heroine**

Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

Deleted

►**Tinmother** (Moderator)

Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@H-in-Heroine
Complimenting a woman is fine.
Making threats is not.
Take a time-out.

►**Ofage**

Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

Oooh, H is in horny jail again.

►**Loliislegal**

Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

Stop the fucking presses.

►**CuteisJustice**

Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

I want to know where the blonde got the stuffed doll. It's adorable. I want one.

►**Man-a-hat-in**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@CuteisJustice
What doll?
End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 … 95, 96, 97
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►**Avengr-R-us** (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

Here's a better video. They talked to spider-man for a bit before peacing out.
Video

►**Answer Key**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

So the blonde is Glynda. Is that her Super name or her real one? She could be going for a whole 'Glynda the Good Witch' thing with her telekinesis.

►**Ekul**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

I want to know how she separated the Rhino from his armour without killing him. Not that I'd feel bad about him turning into mush, but I thought it wasn't possible.

►**Deepview** (Unverified Super)
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

She didn't. It was that mutant squid baby thing. When it touched the Rhino, his armor fell right off.

►**Ekul**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@Deepview
What ‘mutant squid baby?’

►**CuteisJustice**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@Deepview Do you mean the doll? It didn’t do anything.

►**Deepview** (Unverified Super)
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@CuteisJustice @Ekul
It looks like a doll sure, but it was talking the whole time! It moved! If anything, I would say it’s the leader. The others were listening to its instructions for god’s sake!

►**Ekul**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@Deepview
I don’t see any doll, squid-like or otherwise.

►**CuteisJustice**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

@Deepview @Ekul
I can see it, but it just looks like a stuffed toy to me. Some sort of gradient stranger effect? Do different people see more of it?

►**Antigone**
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

I see a doll too. It looks like a Baby Cthulhu for those who can’t see it.
Image
►**Avengr-R-us** (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Oct 11th 2018:

Talked to a few people. The group is a trio, not a duo. The Stranger is strong enough that Spider-man only saw the doll until the end. Not sure of the exact conditions but some people are able to see right through the effect. Conditional ratings are:

Doll: Stranger 3+

Glynda: Shaker 7+

Raven (the long-eared woman. The doll called out the name for those who can't hear it): Mover 5+

All tentative till more is known.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 … 41, 42, 43, 44, 45 … 96, 97, 98

■

♦ **Topic: PRT Leak**

In: Boards ► Supers ► Brockton Bay

SeeingEYE (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know) (Verified Thinker)

Posted On Oct 17th 2018:

For those who don't know me, I am a mutant. My ability is simple. I can access any observation equipment remotely. It also allows me to post here without fear of being taken down.

I have been a member of this forum for the last 15 years. I have made numerous 'leaks' because I believe the public deserves to know what the powers-that-be want to hide.

I am staking my entire reputation on this video. I have quadruple-checked its authenticity, verified it through secondary sources, and called in a bunch of favours from sources in the PRT *who shall remain anonymous* to be on the safe side.

What you are about to watch is the truth. It is a video captured by PRT hidden cameras in the early morning hours of October 17th at the New Wave Memorial in Panacea Park. It is completely unedited, except for the fact that multiple cameras caught different angles.

Video

It is a long video, containing multiple important topics. I will make threads for those I think are most concerning.

Edit: Here are the links: The Red Queen Lives? Glory Girl back from the Dead? X-men rehabilitation?

I would ask the Moderators to make a separate Board for everything related to Mikael (The White Dragon).

Edit: They did, it is already filling up. I posted a few threads on the more important topics: Known Consorts, Known Powers, Blood, and Motivations.

(Showing page 1 of 999)

►**Aroundtheblock** (Veteran Member)

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@SeeingEye? This is going to be good. You always have the juicy stuff.

Edit: Just watched the video. Damn!… I don't even know where to start.

►**Antigone**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

THE RED QUEEN IS ALIVE!? Didn't the League take care of her? She killed Velocity!

►**Addons**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

You clearly haven't watched the whole video. Panacea being alive is the least surprising thing in it. The League always tried to prioritize capture rather than killing. The fact that they covered up her survival is no surprise. Bringing someone dead for years back to life is the part you should really be concerned about.

►**Char**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Addons Or the fact that the afterlife exists at all. Afterlives? Can we get some clarification from Glory Girl on that? As a Pastafarian, I want to know if the Flying Spaghetti Monster in the sky is real or not. I want to go to the great beer volcano in the sky!

►**Notparanoid**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

Guys! You are missing the point!

The Dragon!
It's the one who can bring back the dead. What's to stop it from doing this again?

►**Char**
Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Notparanoid The fact it clearly stated it wouldn't? It also clearly didn't want its involvement getting out. We're lucky it didn't notice the cameras. Imagine Glory Girl showing up one day (if she ever gets out of M/S confinement) and we have no clue what is going on.

►**Threadninja**
Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Char He, not it. He clearly identifies as male. He even has a name. Mikael. It's Hebrew for 'Like God'. I for one welcome our new Dragon Jesus. If we count the Simurgh and the ocean stuff, this is like the third miracle or something. So far, he has only benefited the earth so he's alright in my book.

►**Affectionstarved**
Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

Definitely male.
Yum.
I totally agree with GG. Those lucky bitches.

►**Notparanoid**
Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Affectionstarved Now is not the time to be horny! An alien dragon just got a human body, brought someone back to life, and has an unknown number of powerful Supers at his beck and call. The League couldn't even touch him. What's to stop him from taking over the world? He can just kill everyone and bring back those he wants.

►**MR.Krew**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Notparanoid Its always time to be horny. How has this world survived through alien invasions, supervillains, Justin Beiber, and natural disasters? That's right, through the power of Horny. Why do Supers wear skin-tight costumes? Because Horny is their power source.

Incidentally, I am officially starting a new religion. Our doctrine is sexual liberation. Our god is breasts, buts, and thighs (dicks too if you are into that). Our afterlife is a neverending orgy, filled with the most attractive people imaginable. Mikael and his consorts are our pope and cardinals.

Bra-men.

►**Addons**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@MR.Krew Sign me up!

In all seriousness, what does this mean for us? Like, what does Mikael want? Professor X said he had a Goddess as his Herald (Like Galactus?) so is he some sort of god, like Thor? Why was he a tiny squid baby? Why did he want a human body? He's supposedly been to earth before, so he probably won't destroy the planet. Who's he here to meet? Another 'consort'?

And most importantly: Did he just quote Robin Williams?

►**Noveltry**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Addons Yes. Yes, he did.

There comes a point in a man's life where he needs to ask himself a serious question. One all men face one day.

Is Dragon Jesus actually a dork?

►**Affectionstarved**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

He can be as dorky as he wants if he holds me in those arms.

►**Acree** (Super Groupie)
Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

Mikael seems like a nice guy.

Even if we think Glory Girl is biased (or mastered, don't have proof one way or the other) everything in that video showed him as remarkably human. He showed concern for Panacea when she freaked out by touching the blood, even willing to put off getting a body to make sure she wasn't in danger. When the blonde, Artoria, was being all intense, he showed enough empathy to catch on. These are not the typical traits of villains. I don't know if he is a hero, he clearly sicced that redhead on Wolverine because she was bored, but he will heal so it isn't too bad.

►**Pastothefuture**
Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

Does anyone know who the other women are? I am familiar with Medea and Scathach from myth (my useless minor in mythologies finally came in handy) but the other names are unknown. They look pretty human, but they might be aliens or from different worlds like Prof X said. Just want to know if I am missing something obvious.

We only got three names out of ten (Five if you count Glynda from that video in New York. Link. Raven is the one with long ears in the video in New York, she's an umbrakentic and the one who sealed off the park. She is not visible in this one.)

Artoria: The annoyed blonde who pushed the wheelchair. She had a British accent and called the Dragon Sir Mikael so possibly European from the middle ages?

Robin: The name is also European and she looks Russian, maybe? She didn't have an accent I could identify.

Ranni: The Goddess that supposedly fought the League to a standstill. She did no show up here.

Unnamed blonde woman: The one in green who pulled the barrels of blood out of a scroll of paper.

Unnamed Changer/mover: The black woman who turned into a cat and flew off.

Does anyone know who they are?

►**SeeingEYE** (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know) (Verified Thinker)
Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Pastothefuture I have already started a thread about the consorts and what we know. You can find it HERE.

Edit: @Acree, I also have a thread on known powers HERE.

►**Acree** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

So Mikael is a Trump. The question is to what degree? GG said all the powers were passive but if someone is immune to half the powers out there, and the most dangerous ones, then they are pretty strong. Not counting if they put in the effort to maximize their 'Talent' in combat. That is B lister at least. Avengers level with some training. I would say Trump 8+ at least

►**Notparanoid**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

Prof. X specifically said that the 'Elden Lord' destroyed or conquered other worlds. Early in the video, he mentions two; Bloodborne and Elden Ring. (The latter is probably where he got the title) Why aren't people more worried about this?

►**Char**

Replied On Oct 17th 2018:

@Notparanoid Because there is nothing we can do about it?

The League couldn't do anything to it in space, what makes you think they can fight it in-atmosphere? If the dragon the size of a continent sneezes it will sink the eastern seaboard. If it wanted to destroy the planet for all life, all it would need to do is move half as fast as it did when it ate the Ziz. Its mass and velocity alone would shatter the planet.

All we can do is the same as we've been doing for years. Go about your daily life, try not to think about it too much, hope for the best, and pray the good guys win. All that has changed is we know prayer might actually mean something now.

■

Author's Note:

Pardon any formatting errors; I tried my best. Most spelling errors are intentional, though.

I had to make a judgment call with this one. It would be incredibly easy to write 10K words about Emancipation 3 alone as it is incredibly dense with things the internet would lap up. (Amy being alive, bringing people back from the dead, power speculation etc…) I am sure some of you are disappointed that I didn't go super in-depth.

While I like PHO interludes, they are best treated lightly. They serve as a way for the audience to touch base with the rest of the world in a fic and see how they react to the MC and the plot. Too often, they act as word padding or self-congratulations for the MC and the writer.

*Since the 'World' is as much a character in this fic as any of the cast, I don't need to go super in-depth with PHO. Ideally, how the world reacts comes across more organically during the main story. Because of that, I limited myself to 4k words *Realizes the 'limit' is the size of an early chapter and bangs head on desk.**

I will probably only do one or two more PHO Side Stories for the entirety of this fic, so don't expect it to come up too much.

I will see you all next week for Emancipation 4.

EMANCIPATION IV

Since you've gone, I've been lost without a trace
I dream at night, I can only see your face
I look around, but it's you I can't replace
I feel so cold, and I long for your embrace

"Pain! Suffering! Agonneeeeeee!"

Robin didn't know if she should be amused or worried.

She did not expect this when coming to the kitchen for a fresh coffee and a late afternoon snack.

"Ugh!"

Artoria was sitting at the counter, idly toying with her food.

The King of Knights not eating was a sure sign of the apocalypse, if there ever was one, so Robin did feel that concern was warranted. The dopey smile on her face, her eyes focusing on the unseen distance, and the full-body blush told Robin that the blonde was probably reminiscing about last night, so she settled on amusement.

Medea sitting beside her friend, drinking her tea with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, told the former Strawhat Pirate that this part of the tableau was not of genuine concern.

More concerning was Mikael, sprawled out on the floor, staring vacantly up at the ceiling and making groaning noises.

Once Robin carefully stepped over the man, making sure not to step on the phone beside him, the brunette reached the pot and poured herself some more black gold.

Thus armed, she felt comfortable asking the pertinent questions.

"So," she took a sip. "How was your night?"

"Wonderful," Artoria sighed airily. "The spoils of victory were truly worth the campaign."

Medea and Robin shared smiles as the blonde's blush deepened.

"Mikael?" Robin asked, still amused. He would be one of the first to respond if there was a severe issue, so the brunette wasn't worried.

Just curious.

"There is no Mikael," the man said in a monotone. "There is only the floor. I am Floor, Floor art I. We have become one."

The effect of his dramatic words was ruined when Medea, the cat, came trotting in. Deciding his prone form was the perfect place to sit, she placed herself on his chest like a

loaf of bread. Mikael lifted his head slightly to give his pet a deadpan look, though the feline was already asleep.

“He was having breakfast,” Medea explained at Robin’s questioning look. “He was on that phone, checking the news, when he collapsed onto the ground and started making noises of despair.”

“Ah, understood,” Robin nodded simply.

They had been around the man long enough to know that he became way less dramatic when the chips were down, and things got serious. Something had happened, but it wasn’t a serious concern.

In other words, Mikael was just being a ham.

“I have realized the folly of my action,” he continued in his monotone. “All effort and care, preparation and concern were a mistake. But now my eyes have been opened. The truth is revealed. I know what I must do.”

“And what is that?” Robin asked, playing along. While the man had drawn them all to laughter at one point or another, Robin’s sense of humour was most closely aligned with his. She wanted to know where he was going with this act.

“I must assume my final form,” he said.

“How frightening.”

“Indeed,” he nodded imperiously. Which was impressive since he was still on the floor with a cat on his chest. “I wish it hadn’t come to this, but I must discard my human body the day I received it. To become the ultimate being. One whose mere existence precludes me from needing to worry about anything. I shall become… a Potato!”

There was a pause, the women in the room wondering what sort of new bullshit this was.

“A… potato?” Medea asked dubiously.

“The perfect being!” Mikael exclaimed passionately, still sprawled out on the kitchen floor. “A potato need not care for the opinions of others. A potato need not hide what it is. A potato needs only to sit in one place, embrace mother earth, and live out its existence peacefully. Though my shapeshifting remains limited, I shall still aspire to achieve that bliss. From now on, you may find me embracing the Potato Way.”

“And the Potato Way involves laying on the kitchen floor?”

“No,” Mikael shook his head, his hair sprawling below him. “I achieved knowledge on the Potato Way after becoming one with the floor. To fully embrace it, I need to be on cushions, with video games in hand, a mini fridge filled with junk within reach, and a deep feeling of self-disgust. Only then can I call myself a Couch Potato!”

Robin giggled, Medea groaned, and Artoria went back to her fantasies.

“My reason for being on the ground like this is different,” Mikael continued. “You see, I discovered some shocking news. So surprising was it, you could say it floored me!”

Medea’s groan got louder.

“Did you do all this,” Robin gestured to his sprawled form even as she continued giggling. “Just so you could make puns?”

“Of course,” the man finally sat up, carefully cradling the cat who gave him the stink eye for daring to move and picking up his fallen phone. “What better way to distract yourself than to engage in the lowest form of humour? It is the only thing to do on the Potato Way when your spirit is in taters.”

“Enough!” Medea said as Robin devolved into chuckles. “No more puns. What was so surprising?”

“Spoilsport,” Mikael pouted. Nevertheless, he fiddled with his phone a bit before sliding it along the counter for the greek to look at. Robin opened an eye on the witch’s shoulder so she could see. Even Artoria broke herself out of her daze to read.

“‘Glory Girl Back From The Dead!’” Medea read off the titles of the various news articles. “‘League of Lies; The Red Queen Lives!’ ‘Who is Mikael?!’ They have pictures of all of us!”

“Not all of us,” Mikael clarified, face set. “Everyone from the park, as well as Glynda and you, though the media think you are called Raven. Those that talked to Strange will know differently. They also have a picture of Ranni from when she was fighting the League. They have no knowledge of Emma, Diana, or Melina.”

“There was no one with us,” Robin insisted. “I had eyes and ears all over the district, and Emma, Raven, or Yoruichi would have sensed any I missed.”

“And our Defences protect us from remote viewing,” Medea pointed out, deep in thought. “Magic, divination, any sort of ESP are all covered by the Defences.”

“I think that is where we went wrong,” Mikael sighed, retaking his seat at the counter and taking up his cup of tea. “We were so focused on ensuring Victoria’s return wasn’t traced to us, guaranteeing no higher power was watching, and ensuring that they couldn’t tell others that we overlooked something fundamental. Hidden cameras. Something so mundane that it is explicitly stated to not be covered by the Defences.”

“None of us are very technologically focused,” Robin nodded. One of the perks Mikael had purchased, Grail Knowledge, allowed them all to know how modern appliances work, but it did not change the fact it wasn’t any of their specialty.

“I just criticized Xavier about this, too,” Mikael groaned. “‘When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.’ Or, in this case, ‘When you have magic, every solution is a spell.’ The oldest failure of wizards ever.”

“So,” Artoria finally spoke up, her blush receding slightly. “Has this changed our plans? We had always planned on moving more openly once you had a body.”

“I’ll go over any info I can find with a fine tooth comb, but I don’t think it does,” Mikael said.

“We knew Glory Girl would never be kept a secret for long,” Medea nodded. “Our involvement in the situation being discovered is sub-optimal but not catastrophic. If anything, we can spin this as a net positive.”

“While people bugging us for resurrections will be annoying, it will be only that,” Mikael nodded in agreement. “I do not intend to bring anyone back again, seeing as everyone I do is bound to me, but very few people are likely to mess with me when they know they can’t escape even in death. I am more concerned about what else they managed to ferret out. We are all smarter than the average bear, but this world has some capital G Geniuses. People who pull Deus Ex Machina solutions out of their asses whenever a writer wants them to. They make inventions in a day that don’t follow logic, science, or even common sense. Our lack of ability with tech puts us at a huge disadvantage.”

“Should we consider changing Worlds?” Artoria asked neutrally, her tone not betraying which way she leaned on the subject.

“I do not think we need to go that far,” Medea shook her head. “We have only been here for a month. Though things have yet to go exactly how we wish, they are not terrible either. We have yet to antagonize anyone. They are wary, yes, but they are not enemies. Even if they were, our forces are considerable.”

“I still need to talk to Death,” Mikael pointed out. “Even if that happened today, I would still be against leaving so soon. Not only would that feel too much like running away, but it would set a bad precedent. We must consider this world as one of millions to come. I would hate to start a trend of fleeing the second things got a little inconvenient. Besides, I just got my body.”

“I have never remained in one place for long,” Robin said, thinking of her childhood and her time with her crew. “There is a big difference between being chased out and leaving when the time is right. Not only does one feel horrible, but the other allows for the possibility of returning. To see old friends, visit familiar places, and feel welcome rather than vilified.”

A hand on her arm startled the former Strawhat from her thoughts. Looking down, she found her cup in a white knuckle grip. Looking from the crackling porcelain up the arm resting on her own, Robin saw Mikael smiling softly.

Robin hurriedly raised her cup to her mouth and looked away. Even after her time with the Strawhats and the year on the Island, the tall woman was unused to such

concern.

The way he smiled. A sad, gentle smile as if he knew her thoughts and feelings. More than any other, he understood how it felt to move from place to place, never truly being welcomed.

The way his eyes, slit and draconic yellow, narrowed in concern. Asking her if she was going to be okay.

It made her heart beat irregularly, and Robin felt surprisingly bashful.

“We will need to let the others know,” Arotria said, finally digging into her plate of food with gusto. “We shall start moving more openly. No need to announce our presence but most of what we wished to hide has already been discovered. We should let the others know.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Mikael said, turning from Robin. She was a little disappointed. “I need to touch base with everyone anyway. By the by, how did Emma handle last night? I haven’t seen her today.”

“Not well,” Medea said with a smile. “When Charles Xavier explained how he got one over on her, she looked furious. The worst part was that she was much more powerful than him but didn’t catch his trick. I saw her earlier. She looked less mad but definitely more determined. She went to work like a woman on a mission.”

“I’ll give her a day or two to calm down before I bring it up,” Mikael sighed. “Emma isn’t my biggest fan at the moment. She doesn’t like how passive I’m being. How about the others?”

“Tsunade and Yoruichi headed to Japan. It’s night there, and they were going bar hopping. I also heard something about an Onsen.” Medea listed off her fingers. “I have yet to see Ranni or Melina. They continue to do their own thing, and I am getting worried. Emma took Glynda with her today. Scathach is somewhere in Russia. I believe she is hoping for a fight with their ‘Winter Guard’. Not having to be discreet anymore will make her happy. Priscilla is still working on her project.”

“What project?” Mikael asked, looking confused. He looked unbothered by the idea of Scathach causing a ruckus. So long as nobody died, they could spin it as ‘teacher of heroes testing the new generation’ or something.

“I do not know the exact details, only that the idea came from Victoria. You and Pricilla were the only two who could interact with her. When I asked, all she told me was that she was trying to become a ‘modern bard’.”

“I’ll ask her about it,” Mikael sighed. “What about Diana?”

“I am right here,” the Amazon said as she entered the kitchen. She paused, looking Mikael up and down. “You look good. I trust your body works to your specifications.”

“Ask her,” Mikael nodded teasingly at Artoria, who flushed again. Wonder Woman let out a tinkling laugh as she sat beside the blonde.

“Do not worry. I shall get all the gruesome details from her at a later time. I was tending to Dun Stallion and Torrent since I did not expect either of you to leave the bedroom today.”

“That was the plan,” Mikael nodded, smiling smugly even as Artoria covered her face in her hands. “But after she passed out for the third time, I figured it was time to give her a break.”

“Sir Mikael…” the King of Knights whined piteously as the group looked at the pair in surprise.

“How?” Robin asked, bewildered.

While there was some debate on who was the strongest, deadliest, or most dangerous out of the thirteen women on the Island, it was unanimous that Artoria was the toughest. Not only was her endurance ranked A+, but she had Avalon, which provided instant healing.

Though she had been technically a virgin, by classical definitions at least, the blonde should have outlasted even the most skilled lover.

“Everyone gets Body Talent, but I am the only one with Sticky Fingers and Inexhaustible. They overlap with my Life Element.” Mikael said with a surprising amount of seriousness. “I am not joking here. I could take on dozens of sex goddesses in a single night and come out the victor. The only beings that could be better than me in the bedroom are conceptual beings of desire. Even then, I would probably give as good as I got. I didn’t realize this at first, and I went overboard.”

“So if I managed to capture Aphrodite…” Medea asked with a cruel look on her face.

“While I wouldn’t touch the bitch with a ten-foot pole, let alone my dick, I could mind-break her in a matter of days, yes.” Mikael deadpanned.

Robin noticed Diana looked uncomfortable on the subject. From their talks, she knew Themyscria mainly worshiped Artemis. Still, Aphrodite was one of the goddesses that blessed the Amazons, and the women were very religious. Diana was always conflicted regarding the subject of the greek deities.

On the one hand, Medea came from a different timeline. Their gods were different. Still, Wonder Woman couldn’t say that her version hadn’t performed similar deeds to the one in Medea’s home world. Caught wanting to defend her religion, as well as the goddess she had actually met, against her friendship with Medea and the woman’s understandable grievance against the greek deities, Diana tended to avoid the subject at all possible.

It didn’t help that Mikael was incredibly blasphemous and dismissive of any religion.

Especially the greek gods.

Robin didn't know if it was from his time in the Soulsborne worlds or when he was a regular human, but she decided to give the woman a way out.

"How did things go last night?"

"I wasn't able to find her," Diana responded with a grateful smile at the former pirate. "She wasn't at her apartment, nor have I seen her at our usual haunts."

"You can't expect those places to be the same," Mikael pipped in, idly scratching Medea's ears. "Unlike in your world, as far as I can tell, Cheetah is a complete villain here."

"I know the odds are slim," Diana nodded sadly. "But I owe it to my friend to give her a chance. With the research we did to get you a body, fixing her condition should be simple. I just need to talk to her."

"Would you like some help?" Robin offered, pouring a cup of coffee for the woman and passing it over. Her plan for the day had been to spend it reading, and she was in the middle of an exciting book on ancient Egypt archeology, but helping out her friend was more important.

"Unfortunately, I do not believe you can help." Diana shook her head as she took the drink gratefully. "I have no idea where on earth she is. Once there is a sighting, I would appreciate your aid."

"If any of us can help, let us know," Mikael said as he finished his tea and stood up. "I'm going to look for the others to tell them the news. Do you mind filling Diana in?"

"What news?"

"Mikael has decided to become a vegetable," Robin said seriously. She then dodged a swat from Medea.

"Last night was recorded," the witch said instead as the pirate giggled to herself.

Robin's eyes tracked Mikael as he left the room. She briefly wondered if they would be forced to leave this world soon. She knew he was itching to leave though he had not said anything.

Mikael, for all that he enjoyed hamming it up, was the type of man who kept his cards close to his chest. His humour and drama covered his true thoughts and acted as a barrier to the rest of the world. This man hadn't left the Island for weeks until Medea had given him an item that masked his existence. He spent days formulating a plan to keep his interaction with Amelia and Victoria hidden.

He never said anything about it, but Robin believed he was still adjusting to having so many people around. He had spent the last century primarily by himself, and it would take time for him to adapt. Compounding on that was how overt his entrance to this world was.

He could ignore his dragon form being the center of attention because he could still operate incognito in his avatar. It was the freedom that secrecy brought that he desired. The thought that everyone on the planet knew who he was, what he looked like, and what he could do, was probably tearing him up inside. Eyes would always be on him now unless he walked around with Medea's bracelet 24-7. If she were in his place, she would be looking to move on ASAP.

Robin's eyes landed on Diana, listening to Medea, and her mind slid to Emma and Raven.

The pirate smiled to herself, taking another sip of her coffee.

Mikael had promised to support them all, and he was keeping his word.

The Family came first, his desires second.

Still, Robin decided to keep an eye on him.

Mikael could be stupidly noble at times, the 'suffer in silence' type. If he looked out for them, they needed to do the same for him.

That is what Family was for, after all.

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Wonder Woman threw her head back with a loud moan, pleasure overtaking her.

Once she blinked the stars from her eyes, she looked down at the messy blonde hair and green eyes of the woman between her legs. Unfamiliar though the face was, the amazon felt its stoic features were too smug for her liking.

Pulling the blonde up on the bed and giving the woman a kiss, she returned the favour with interest.

After all, it wouldn't do for the student to surpass the master. She would shame her fellow amazons if a woman, barely introduced to pleasure, could exceed her centuries of experience.

Even as she started to work over the blonde's most sensitive spots, Artoria was already moaning.

"Diana, Diana," the blonde panted her name even as her hands gripped her black locks tightly. "Diana, Diana, Dia-"

******

-na!"

Wonder Woman awoke with a start.

Her body was covered in sweat, and she was breathing as if she had just gone six

rounds in the ring with Ares. It took a moment of blinking for her to recognize the room's blank walls and bare features.

"Diana!" Bruce's voice came from the speaker on the wall. He was the one who was chanting her name, not the unfamiliar blonde.

"I am awake," she finally answered as she threw the plain covers from her form. She needed a change of clothes and a shower, but that could wait. "What has happened?"

The standard protocol for M/S confinement was to keep interactions to a minimum. Though she was a bit lonely, Diana did not blame any of her peers for the situation, even after a few weeks. Ever since they had discovered the… connection between her and the Elden Lord, they had all agreed it was better to keep her in isolation. J'onn filled in for her at a few events to keep up the charade that Wonder Woman was still active.

Contact had been scarce, though the Amazon knew they kept an eye on her. Any time she discovered anything new, she would write it down in a paper journal and then pass it through a deposit box for them to evaluate.

Her discoveries were few and far between over the weeks, but some nuggets came to her.

Like today.

She discovered a new name.

Artoria.

Diana didn't know why she dreamed of being intimate with the blonde, but she recognized the foreign influence for what it was. This was no mere wet dream but a by-product of whatever connection between her and the monstrous Dragon.

"Yesterday morning there was an incident," Bruce reported. "We will be using the Facility for two more people."

"Who and why?" She asked as she dressed.

The Containment Facility could house a dozen heroes in case of mass exposure, either in complete isolation or with joint use of communal areas. Despite existing for over five years, Diana was only the fourth person placed in it. Most of the time, J'onn or other telepaths could handle dismantling the Master or Stranger effects.

For two people to be admitted at once was unusual, to say the least.

"Amelia Dallon and…" Bruce paused, and Diana took a moment to contemplate why the reformed healer would need to be in M/S. Had another group discovered her survival? Villains perhaps?

Either way, Diana would be there for the heroine. The amazon was very proud of the woman she had become. It took great strength of character to let go of the quest for vengeance.

“Who else?” She asked, now realizing the uncharismatic silence for what it was.

Worry.

“And Victoria Dallon.” Bruce said slowly.

What.

“What?” Diana asked sharply.

If it had been anyone else but Batman who said that, she would have thought it a joke.

While the young blonde had never been a sidekick or apprentice to the amazon, the similarity of their abilities and the closeness of their cities meant that Diana had tutored the young Glory Girl a time or two. They were not best friends, but close nonetheless.

Only her dedication to justice, concern for the newly formed Justice League falling apart, and the vindictive pleasure at the sight of what Amelia did to the Joker kept her from ending the clown then and there.

“It appears,” Bruce explained as if the words were being dragged from his lips. “That the Elden Lord can bring the dead back to life. In exchange for Victoria’s return, Amelia gave him the human body he was looking for. He was unaware that the entire process was filmed by hidden cameras. Everyone in the world saw it.”

“What?” Diana asked again. There was so much to unpack there. She didn’t even know where to begin.

“Indeed,” Bruce, at least, shared her disbelief. “You can imagine we will keep a close eye on the sisters to verify their states. Your familiarity with both will help. We want to ensure it truly is Victoria and any influence the Elden Lord might have over either. He explicitly stated that only his will kept her alive, and he did not want knowledge of his abilities spread. We do not know if he knows of the video, though it is safe to assume he will discover it soon.”

“And when he does, he might kill this ‘Victoria’ again,” Diana said grimly. If that happened, there would be no helping Amelia. They would be forced to put her down.

What a terrible thing to experience.

“‘Victoria’ insists he won’t,” Bruce continued, sounding dubious. “She has repeatedly voiced opinions in his favour. He also did something to Amelia, altering her powers. Not only are you to make sure Victoria is who she says she is, but you are also to ensure he is not controlling her or Amelia. Ideally, you will also be able to gather more information they did not reveal to us in interrogation.”

Left unsaid was what she would need to do if Victoria proved to be a fake or if Amelia was… distraught.

“Understood,” Diana said. Though she had just woken up, she suddenly felt

exhausted.

The Justice League was licensed to employ lethal measures if the target was a verifiable threat to humanity. The Elden Lord, by his sheer size and power, did fall under that category, as did the Red Queen due to the potential of her abilities. Most League members, Batman and Superman especially, did everything they could to prevent things from getting to that point.

Sometimes it wasn't enough.

Then they turned to Diana.

Though she didn't enjoy it, her culture and experience meant it was less burdensome for her than the others.

This would be the first time she was forced to kill her friends if it came to it.

"They will be there in five minutes," Bruce said. "I have asked for Amelia to provide a check-up for you. Her experience with the Elden Lord may explain your connection that J'onn failed to find. Ask her about her changed abilities when she does."

"Before that," Diana said as she finished clasping her chest piece. "I had another dream. And another name."

"Describe it," Bruce said in a no-nonsense tone.

Diana did, not feeling embarrassed by the nature of the experience. She trusted Bruce to be logical, and embarrassment was not a concern when lives were potentially in danger.

"The blonde, Artoria, was with him yesterday night," he said after listening to her explanation. "As was Yoruichi, the dark-skinned woman you described, though he did not say her name. The intimate nature of the dream is concerning. The Elden Lord explicitly stated he was not searching for new 'consorts', though we must take that with a grain of salt. Any new insights?"

"None," Diana shook her head. While the dreams were straightforward, the 'insights' were random and almost complete nonsense.

In the meeting following the League's failure to stop the Dragon from reaching the Earth, someone had casually asked if anyone knew how old the thing was.

'35,866,943 years old', Diana had answered without a second thought. That had been the first tip-off about the connection between the two.

They had tried asking various questions, and only occasionally could Diana form a coherent answer.

Favourite food? Varied based on time of day.

Favourite colour? Royal Purple.

How many people had he killed? 2,783,924 'people'. For some reason, Diana had been forced to put people in air quotes, prompting further investigation.

How many humans had he killed? 2,124,136 humans.

How many things had he killed? 9,546,434 things.

How much death had he caused? Incalculable.

Those were some of the few insights Diana had on the Elden Lord. More helpful questions, like weaknesses, motivations, abilities, associates, or anything else the League could use to banish the Dragon, went unanswered. That wasn't even considering some of the nonsense answers.

How would he describe himself? 'I am Da Dragon.'

Does he have any other titles? Queen of England.

His greatest enemy? Corporate Contractual Clauses.

For the last few weeks, Diana had been asking herself every question she could think of to try and gain more information about the biggest alien on Earth. She had less than a dozen answers to show for her efforts, most of them being worse than useless.

"They will be there momentarily," Bruce continued when Diana did not contribute more. "Have your weapon on hand and armour nearby in the coming week."

"You do not need to tell me to be careful." While she appreciated her friend's concern, Diana was no novice. Even in isolation, she would take appropriate precautions when nearby unknown variables.

"Not from them. Be ready for extraction at a moment's notice." There was an undercurrent in his gruff voice that most would not have noticed.

Worry.

"Bruce?" Diana frowned at the speaker.

"They are here," he said before going silent.

Indeed, Wonder Woman could hear a voice echo through the underground halls of the facility.

"Woah, this place is pretty swanky. Way nicer than regular confinement."

The voice was familiar, sending a pang of pain and nostalgia through Diana.

She found the pair of young women near the communal area of the facility.

Amelia looked better than Diana had ever seen her. Like someone had taken an artistic brush to all her features. No more eye bags, nor freckles. Despite looking more beautiful than ever, she was slouched over the dining table as if exhausted.

The other woman, blonde and bright-eyed, was hovering in the air and pilfering stuff from the fridge.

"You want something, Ames?" Victoria asked as she pulled out some yogurt and fruit. "I'm trying out that cooking ability. I'll turn down the addictiveness, but it'll be great."

"Hurry it up," the healer grouched. "I want to get some sleep. Powers or not, I'm

tired. If you wake me up for anything less than the world ending again, I'll find a way to turn your boobs small again."

"Nyeh," Victoria took her head out of the fridge to stick her tongue out at her sister. "That doesn't work on me any- DI!"

Having spotted Diana approaching, the blonde left her fridge to fly towards the amazon, arms wide.

Wonder Woman accepted the hug. Even if Victoria was fake, it felt good to hold the younger woman in her arms again. She felt her eyes moisten but shook it off.

"It is good to see you again," she said as she separated herself from the recently resurrected heroine.

"Totally," the blonde nodded happily. "How've you been! Are you and Steve still going out? Have you decided to tie the knot? Any recent ass-kicking I should know about?"

The blonde babbled happily for a moment, asking all sorts of questions. It was like Victoria had never left.

"I am doing well," Diana interrupted, knowing it would never end if she didn't reign in the younger woman. "Steve and I broke up a few years ago, though we are still friends. I am currently single and not looking for anyone at the moment. The League and my duties as a diplomat keep me too busy. As for 'ass-kicking'? I have a few stories to tell if you're interested."

"Totally," Victoria repeated before pausing. "Wait! How come you're here? Not that it's not awesome to see you again, it totally is, but I thought me and Ames were supposed to be in confinement."

"To babysit us," Amy snarked, head resting on her arms while she eyed the two from her position at the table.

"Actually, your arrival surprised me," Diana explained. "I am in confinement as well for much the same reason. Our Draconic arrival is making a habit of targeting women with his influence."

"What?" Victoria asked, looking confused. "The Boss did something?"

"We do not know what happened," Diana nodded. "I find myself with a connection to him that was concerning enough to have me placed here for the last few weeks while we evaluate the possible effects."

"What type of effects?" Amelia asked, perking up in interest.

"Memories not my own, random insights into various facets of the Elden Lord. It is all very confusing and haphazard."

That was the most concerning thing for Diana personally, the randomness of

everything. She was no stranger to being targeted, either for her beauty or abilities. Ranni had straight out threatened to kidnap her, a common threat levied at heroines, but since the conflict in space, nothing had come of it. Diana much preferred a danger she could face head-on, with a clear cause and effect, than one that had her running in circles looking for answers.

"That doesn't sound like the Boss," Victoria mumbled, thinking deeply. "He's very hush-hush, ya know? I was with them for a few days, and he kept me with him or another one of the women. Made sure I didn't see much, though he did tell me about these nifty abilities I got. Either way, giving out knowledge isn't the type of thing he'd do."

"You said you have Insights?" Amy stood from the table and approached the pair. "What type? Seeing things nobody else is? Babbling nonsense? Suddenly knowing things you have no right to know?"

"The latter," Diana said, surprised the healer could guess that.

"Do I have permission to heal you?" Amelia asked hand outstretched for Diana to grab.

Though the healer was here in case she was under the influence of the Elden Lord, Diana decided to trust her. This wasn't the first time the biokinetic had healed her. Diana placed her hand in the open palm.

Amelia almost immediately frowned, her mouth turning downward as her eyes closed. After a few seconds of silence, she let go of Diana's hand with a sigh.

"Well, I know what's wrong," the healer said, massaging her temples.

"What?" Victoria asked.

"She looked into the abyss, and the abyss socked her in the face," Amelia deadpanned before thinking better of it. "Actually, it's closer to the abyss bopping her on the nose. She gained Insight alright, but only enough to be noticeable, nothing beneficial."

"What?" Diana asked, feeling like she was missing something.

"Ohh," Victoria, on the other hand, seemed to understand. "Like what happened to you!"

"Close, but not exactly," Amelia shook her head. "I got too much too fast. It overloaded me, and I would have been reduced to a babbling fool if it weren't for Mikael. She's in much better shape. She's building it up slowly, much safer than diving headfirst into crazy town. Though how she's getting it, I don't know."

"Do you mind explaining in more detail?" Diana asked, feeling even more confused. "And who is Mikael?"

"Mikael is the Boss."

"Basically," the healer decided to explain when it didn't seem like Victoria would be

much help. “What Mikael, the Elden Lord or whatever, is, is not something mortal minds can naturally grasp. It is too much. He limits himself to mortal standards, so he doesn’t overwhelm our senses. If, however, we gain access to more of the Eldritch Truth through some sort of medium, like my powers, then that knowledge can overwhelm us. Insight is knowledge. The more you have, the more you know and the more susceptible you are to madness.”

“I have met deities before,” Diana frowned at the thought that she was possibly going mad just from knowing a bit more about a being. “Many, in fact. They were not so hazardous.”

“I’ve met Thor too,” Amelia pointed out, reaching for her pocket for a cigarette. Victoria and Diana gave her disapproving looks, but she lit it anyway. “Relax, I’m sure ventilation down here is state of the art.”

“But it stinks!” Victoria pouted.

“Tough. The best way to describe Mikael’s existence isn’t using terms like a god. Think of everyone on earth is blind, and we communicate solely through sound. A regular person can talk at normal volume, someone with abilities can scream, and a god is a car horn. Stronger, sure, but fundamentally the same basis. Mikael is the colour spectrum. He is something we just can’t perceive.”

“So Insight is the ability to see colours in this world? How does that work?”

“Through the Eyes.” Though Amelia said that, she pointed at her temple rather than her face. “That’s the best way to describe it. When you gain Insight, you gain Eyes in your brain. My power can see them, but I can’t touch them. Even if I did brains, which I don’t, I wouldn’t be able to mess with them. They are only biological half the time, blinking in and out of existence.”

“So I have eyes in my brain?” Diana raised her hand unconsciously to her head.

“Three of them,” Amelia nodded. “Give or take one. It’s hard to say for sure since they are so finicky. That’s why I said you were lucky. I have forty-two. Imagine a blind person’s first sight is the sun on a bright day. That’s what happened to me. You are starting to see, but you are wearing dark-tinted glasses at night.”

Diana took in the disconcerting thoughts with a frown.

Why her?

Though Ranni had focused on her, it couldn’t solely be due to her beauty. Captain Marvel had also been there, and the goddess had never even looked at the blonde.

Had the blue woman felt the connection she shared with the Elden Lord even then? What sort of connection was it? Was this how the Dragon chose its ‘consorts’? Find women, gift them with Insight, and take who survived?

“So you are not able to remove these Eyes? This Insight?” Diana asked, pondering whether she should reach out to her mother and the sorceresses of Themyscria for help rather than spend more time in confinement for something that wouldn’t go away.

“I can’t remove them, but I can do to you what Mikael did to me,” Amelia said, turning away from the pair of women and pulling down the back of her shirt.

There, where her shoulders met her spine at the base of her neck, was a symbol carved into her flesh. It looked almost like a menorah, only with seven candle holders instead of the traditional nine.

“This is ***Deep Sea****, a bulwark guarding the mind and is an augur of Mikael’s eldritch Truth.* I can give you one too. Unlike the others, this one is solely dedicated to resisting the negatives of Insight buildup, so it should help you if you don’t want to deal with the after-effects.”

“I shall hold off for now,” Diana denied. Even if she was annoyed by the random knowledge, carving mysterious symbols into her flesh seemed like a bad idea.

“Suit yourself,” Amelia shrugged. “I’m going to crash. Let me know if you change your mind.” The healer trundled off towards one of the bedrooms.

“Don’t mind her,” Victoria said with a smile, floating over to the kitchen. “Let me make you something. The food is supposed to be awesome. You can tell me what I’ve missed. Is Batman still such a sourpuss?”

“He is,” Diana welcomed the change of subject. The man was probably watching this right now if he wasn’t already dissecting all that Amelia had revealed. A perfect opportunity to tease the man for keeping her in the dark.

Whatever Bruce was worried about and hiding from her, it better not be too serious, or she would read him the riot act.

Author's Note:

'll end it there. A shorter chapter to get back into the flow is exactly what the doctor ordered. I had initially planned another scene, but that one got a bit… larger than I was expecting. While this chapter acts as a way to touch base with a few characters and is a bit slower than I like, it is also important as it leads into the second half of Emancipation and numerous plot points for the rest of the fic.

Things have primarily settled down IRL, so I am happy to get back to regularly scheduled releases. The after-effects of Emancipation 3, the Third Miracle, will be felt for a while, but the story moves on.

Next chapter, you can look forward to some familiar faces, more from the League, copious foreshadowing, some important Marvel characters' first appearances, and a return to Mikael's perspective.

I'll see you all next Friday.

EMANCIPATION V

Well, I took a walk around the world to ease my troubled mind
I left my body lying somewhere in the sands of time
But I watched the world float to the dark side of the moon
I feel there's nothing I can do, yeah
I watched the world float to the dark side of the moon
After all I knew, it had to be something to do with you
I really don't mind what happens now and then
As long as you'll be my friend at the end

"Fury," Amanda greeted the dark-skinned man neutrally, not letting any emotion into her voice.

"Waller," the older man responded just as neutrally.

To the casual observer, it might have looked like a tense standoff between two 'rival' department heads. The PRT was US-based while SHIELD was international, but both operated as 'normal' bureaus that dealt with the 'abnormal'. Both directors were notoriously stubborn people, neither with powers of their own but managing to hold their high in the presence of heroes and gods.

There was some truth to that supposition that they were rivals, but it failed to capture all the subtext in that greeting. Neither let it show, but there was a wealth of knowledge and emotion conveyed in those two words.

A greeting between two former lovers.

An acknowledgment of the seriousness of the situation.

A silent request for support and an equally quiet answer in the affirmative.

Amanda didn't trust Nick completely, and she was sure he felt the same way about her. SHIELD and the PRT had worked together before, even if their jurisdictions were different, but you couldn't be too careful in the cutthroat world of politics and espionage. Nevertheless, both were the only two 'normal' people in this meeting, and a certain amount of solidarity could be expected to not be overwhelmed by the others present.

"Director," Rogers nodded at Amanda before doing the same to Nick with an amused smile. "Director. If you don't mind, we should call each other by name. Otherwise, things will get confusing."

"Good to see you, Captain," Nick shook the hero's hand firmly. Only Amanda's familiarity with the old man allowed her to notice the slight slacking in his jaw.

Nick Fury didn't like too many people, but Captain America was top of his list of those he did. Primarily due to their long familiarity during WWII. When Steve Rogers was first

found and thawed, Fury was one of the only active people still around who were familiar with the time-displaced man due to his slowed ageing.

It was also thanks to Fury's recommendation that Steve Rogers was nominated for head of the Protectorate after Eidolon's leadership proved… lacking.

"Rogers," Amanda greeted the American icon neutrally. While not to the same degree as Fury, she still held some admiration for Captain America, as did anyone from her generation, but she wouldn't let that show. As a black woman with no powers, she could allow no weaknesses if she wanted to maintain respect and authority.

"Shall we head in," Rogers said, opening the door to the meeting room.

Though they were in the Hall of Justice, everyone knew that the building was but a facade of the proper League headquarters that allowed the public to feel secure in their ability to 'monitor' the international team. This meeting room wasn't one of the public ones, instead serving as a place where they could talk without being overheard while still being 'public'.

The wonders of international politics.

The room they entered was large enough to handle two dozen people easily, though only three seats at the large table were occupied.

Superman and Green Lantern were chatting with each other while Batman plugged away at a computer terminal. The Hero of Tomorrow noticed their arrival and stood to welcome them with a friendly smile.

"Welcome," he said as he shook their hands in turn before indicating s their seats. "Thank you for arriving at such short notice. I imagine you are all busy."

"We are," Amanda said as she took her place. Fury sat to her left, and Roger on his left in turn. Her words were curt and direct. Dictating the pace of the meeting was critical. "We have read the files. Let's get on with it."

"Very well." Never losing his affable smile, Superman nodded to Batman, who pressed a button on the table. "It is 2pm Eastern Standard Time on Sunday, October 21st, 2018. This meeting serves as a conjoining of information on the subject of designation: ELDEN LORD, also going by the name Mikael. This recording of this meeting is accessible to those with UN-13 security clearance. Participants are; Captain America as leader of the Protectorate, Nicholas Fury in his capacity as director of SHIELD, Amanda Waller in her capacity as director of the Parahuman Response Team, Green Lantern in his capacity as Lantern of Sector 2814, Batman as technical support, and Superman as coordinator. All accounted for."

When the Justice League was first formed as a body able to handle international incidents and galactic threats, there were concerns that it and SHIELD were too American-

focused. Though many of its members hailed from other countries or planets, the headquarters were in the US, as were many of its founding members' hometowns.

To assuage this, the League went out of its way to keep other member nations abreast of ongoing efforts and situations by keeping detailed records so long as doing so didn't threaten security.

Amanda was sure most information was kept need to know, but the token effort did assuage many concerned nations to a degree.

She didn't buy it one bit.

"This meeting is a follow-up to the meeting on September 24th, 2018, in the wake of the events of the night of September 21st and the following days. For more details, please see the record." With the formal proceedings out of the way, Superman nodded to Captain America. "In order of chronological events, the following documented appearance of the Elden Lord was on October 11th in New York. Videos are in the record. Captain, if you would."

"The Avengers never interacted with the Elden Lord or his associates directly, and neither has any member of the Protectorate." Captain America's words were delivered with the measured efficiency of a soldier. He leaned over the meeting table and inserted a USB into the port as he spoke. And image two women, one tall and blonde and the other shorter with pointed ears, floated above the table. "We did gather intel from witnesses, including interviewing Spider-man and Stephen Strange. I will not go over everything as it can be found in the report on the incident. The talk with Stephen Strange is classified as UN-16 classified and thus will not be discussed in this meeting."

Amanda had read that report.

What a shit show.

She had torn the head of NY PRT a new one for their poor response time. If they had been better coordinated and not left things to a vigilante, sanctioned or not, they might have been able to confront the Elden Lord then and there. The effort might still have failed, but the option would have been possible, and they would have more information than they would now.

As it was, it felt like everyone was reacting to everything the crazy Dragon did rather than being proactive and dictating the pace of their encounters.

Needless to say, nobody at this table was happy being so out of their depth.

"At the time of the incident, Spider-man believed only Glynda and Medea were present." Steve continued professionally. "It should be noted that Raven, the umbrakinetic, has never been recorded on camera, and we are unaware of her range or the extent of her abilities and appearance. Mikeal was also using a Stranger power at the time, likely due to

the inhuman nature of his form and a desire to remain inconspicuous. Either he was unable to, or unwilling, to spread that ability to his companions, so it has been graded at 2+ due to so many people proving immune. Spider-man commented that, while he could hear the Elden Lord's voice, he only perceived it as a doll at first. It was only after a considerable mental effort that he was able to connect the two."

"And Rhino? What is the situation with him?" Amanda asked, looking over the pictures of the Russian man in his new cell.

"Appears no worse for wear. He maintains the same strength as when equipped with the super suit, which shouldn't be possible." Batman grumbled. "Numerous doctors are keeping an eye on him and the suit itself. They have been unable to determine how the Elden Lord separated the two without killing Alexsi."

"The Elden Lord's group had the option of not revealing themselves." Captain America pointed out good-naturedly. "Cameras in the area indicate that they sensed the commotion well before Rhino first appeared, possibly due to the precognition Glory Girl mentioned. They stepped out of the way initially, but once they evaluated the situation, they stepped in. They stopped the rampage, saving civilians in the process, and also repaired the damage. Consideration should be given to their heroic leanings when making a threat assessment."

"Threat assessment is not a morality test," Fury said. "It is an evaluation of a being's or group's potential to harm society and humanity as a whole."

"But we cannot ignore the potential for good even if they could be a threat," Superman said seriously to the spy before turning back to Rogers with a smile. "Is there anything else you would like to put on record?"

"Only that the party had breakfast at a nearby cafe before proceeding to Stephen Strange's house," the head of the Avengers said. "We have interviewed a few of the people there, including a couple they talked to, but we could not dig out any new details."

"Thank you," Superman nodded at the Captain, who sat down. "Director Waller, would you mind telling us about the incident that occurred in the early morning hours of October 17th at Panacea Park?"

Amanda stood and slid her USB port into the console in the center of the table. Batman quickly pulled up the relevant files and projected an image of a dark park lit by fluorescent leaves. Ten figures, half hidden by the dim light, were visible. The two X-men, Amelia and Victoria Dallon, and the Elden Lord and his 'consorts'.

"The first indication of the incident was at 0200 when all cameras in Panacea Park went dark. Initially, it was believed to be a power issue. After contacting tech support, the agents determined that the cameras were still operating correctly. Following procedure,

the agents reported the incident, flagging it as low priority and thus to be addressed in the morning. At 0211, Amelia Dallon arrived, and we got a good look at the situation. Our Tinkers and Thinkers are still looking over the trees to determine if they are a biological threat."

"Why was the Protectorate not alerted?" Batman asked, almost accusingly.

"One of the agents on duty was present during the Joker incident six years ago," Amanda bit back. Deflecting the topic to the Dark Knight's own failings and answering the question. "He was one of the few survivors of the battle with the Red Queen, his injuries removing him from the field, and had been sworn to secrecy on Operation Red-demption. He recognized Amelia Dallon and, understanding the significance of the footage, took steps to ensure the security of the information. He alerted the head of PRTENE, who made her way to headquarters. He also ensured the other agents knew that security leaks would be punished severely. Were it not for the mutant who leaked the news later, the incident would have been quietly contained, and he would have received a promotion."

"We have apprehended the woman," Fury said. "Going by the tag 'SeeingEYE', this is not the first time she leaked confidential information. She is detained until further notice and tried for her crimes."

Bullshit, Amanda thought as she eyed the spy. The mutant would likely be 'persuaded' to work for SHIELD to lighten her sentence. It also rankled Waller that Fury had been able to capture her so fast. It had only been days since the incident.

"Were it not for her, this situation would be adequately handled, thanks to the actions of my agents," Amanda continued. "Further review of the cameras in the park revealed that the Elden Lord, Medea, and Glynda visited the day of the New York incident. It was not flagged due to the Stranger power. Piecing information together, the Elden Lord likely visited the park to revive Amelia Dallon and use her abilities to build himself a human body. He possibly learned about Operation Red-demption through communing with the dead and then approached her with the offer of resurrecting her sister for her compliance."

While most people were hung up on coming back to life and the knowledge of afterlives, Amanda was more concerned with the threat operational security would face if someone could talk to the dead. It meant silencing people would not be as simple as killing them but doing so in a way that ensured they couldn't convey important information after death.

"All other information is in the reports and video," Amanda said and sat down without prompting. Though this was supposed to be a conjoining of information, the PRT and Protectorate were US entities, unlike SHIELD and the Justice League. Sharing extra information was something she didn't do unless absolutely necessary. Fury could spout all

he wanted about ‘defending the world’, but Amanda held America’s interests first.

The entire park had been placed under quarantine due to the trees counting as biotinker experiments. The other countries didn’t need to know about the few drops of blood they managed to gather from the dirt that had fallen from Panacea’s hands.

“Thank you, Director Waller,” Superman said and nodded to Green Lanter. The space cop had been silent and only observed the situation until now. “Green Lantern has just returned to earth after investigating the Elden Lord in space for the last month. Captain Marvel has not returned yet from her investigations, but once she does, we will update the report.”

“I am afraid I do not have too much news to share.” With a wave of his hand, a green glow formed over the table. A large image was projected, egglike in shape and filled with stars. Grid lines separated the image into sectors. “This is a universe representation, categorized into 3600 sectors by the Green Lantern Corps.” A small blue dot, out in the middle of nowhere, glowed. “This is sector 2814. Us.”

A line flowed from the dot along the edge of the diagram. It didn’t cross through the center but still covered a massive swathe of the chart. The line continued beyond the image into unknown territory.

“This is the route the Elden Lord took to reach earth, as best as I can tell. I have talked with the Guardians of the Universe, and they have no record of the being known as the Elden Lord before his appearance last month. This means he doesn’t originate from the 3600 sectors but what is referred to as the Unknown Sectors, those not properly mapped by the Lanterns. As reported, on his way here, he was noted by another lantern by happenstance. Going on the premise of this not being his first visit to earth, it is possible that all past visits were not catalogued due to his travel speed. Over the last month, I have been combing along this trail to try and discover anything about past visits or other planets he has arrived at.”

“That is Shi’ar territory,” Superman said with a frown. Amanda was familiar with the big names in space, and the Shi’ar commanded one of the largest known empires.

“That was the main problem I faced,” Green Lantern nodded. “The Shi’ar Empire recently skirmished with the Thanagarians. On top of that, one of their capital worlds was ransacked by a third force from a rogue planet, not from any empires. As you can imagine, they were not too thrilled to have external factors present, Green Lantern or not.”

“So you were not able to get anything,” Amanda said disparagingly.

“I could not get anything on the Elden Lord from the Shi’ar, though I was able to update the League’s database on potential space-born threats that I discovered. The complete list can be examined later and isn’t pertinent to this meeting. Still, a few of note

are Orion, the one to ransack the Shi'ar, the Sun-eater's location, and Galactus' most recent meal in the Thanagarian domain. That was the spark of the conflict between the two civilizations. The trip wasn't completely wasted on the dragon front, either. I did manage to find one group that did have records of the Elden Lord. The Voldi."

"I am not familiar with the name," Fury said.

"I would be shocked if you were," Superman explained. "They are an old but tiny community. No military force to speak of. Despite being technologically advanced, they lean on the Shi'ar and Kree for protection and seldom leave their home. They concern themselves more with drinking, partying, and courtly intrigue. I cannot imagine them being more well informed than the Shi'ar."

"Well-informed would be a stretch," Green Lantern nodded, and his projected image shifted from the universe to a triangular spacecraft. "This is the Voldi Tear, their artificial homeworld. It is mobile and well-cloaked. I only discovered it by accident by following the trail of the Elden Lord who passed it by. According to them, this is the second time the race met the Dragon, though records of that incident are ancient. Millions of years old, to be exact and steeped in religious rhetoric."

"What did you find?" Amanda asked directly.

"To quote their records, translated into English, 'In the wake of the Void Falcon, the Heart of Voldi did travel, filled with gratitude and reverence. Though the pilgrimage was long and winding, the feathered people discovered the Sleeper. Shaped as a Winged White Serpent, it wrapped the Void Falcon in a loving embrace as it reposed. From their union, all Life is sprung.' The next few pages are pretty much love poetry about the union of the 'Void Falcon' and the 'Sleeper'. It is incredibly dense stuff, and I only connected the Sleeper to the Elden Lord because of a mural of a white dragon with six wings curling around a jewel."

"So they worship it," Amanda surmised.

"They do, though it is regarded as half myth, half real. Near the end of the 'chapter' of their religious text dedicated to it, a few things stood out to me. Firstly, they were 'guided by the Sleeper's Dream to a new pilgrimage'. In other words, the Elden Lord got rid of them while they were still asleep without destroying them. Not only that, but they could never find the 'mating grounds' again. Finally, the chapter ends with a prophecy. 'Once the Sleeper awakes from his Dream, the Heart of the Voldi shall overflow with Life as the Void Falcon joins its Lord in Holy Matrimony'. Also, records indicate the 'prophet' went mad in his later years, though how that was isn't recorded."

"What is this Void Falcon?" Amanda asked. "Another one of its 'consorts'?"

"The Voldi were very cagey about it," Green Lantern projected an image of a bird

made out of stars. “They didn’t have any pictures of it, despite insisting it was a real entity, only more murals like the Elden Lord. From my inference, they not only rever several ‘deities’, such as the Void Falcon, but they also harvest some of the energies they leave behind to power their homeworlds. This would mean the Void Falcon is a real thing and powerful, but they don’t want to attract its attention, so they stay away. Is it a ‘consort’? I do not know, though it is likely. It could be Raven, the umbrakinetic we haven’t seen, as it would fit the imagery. But we also must accept the possibility that the Elden Lord has consorts or other retainers not currently with him.”

“Ranni mentioned ‘conquering’ worlds, so we have to assume he has a large resource base to draw on when making a threat assessment. We cannot let the earth become one of those,” Batman chimed in harshly.

“Anything else?” Amanda asked the Green Lantern with pursed lips.

“No,” he shook his head and sat down. “Other cultures, planets, or organizations may have met or seen the Elden Lord before, but I could not find them, and they didn’t record it with the Oans. I was also unable to find any indication of the ‘mating grounds’, though that is probably in the Unknown Sectors, which are nowhere near as populous as the 3600 known ones.”

“Thank you for the effort, nonetheless. Batman?”

“Evaluations of the Island are ongoing,” the cowled man said. “We have determined that those with ‘malicious’ intent can access the pocket dimension. Nobody who has done so has returned, and no information has been transmitted across the barrier. Those with neutral or even peaceful desires have not been able to cross the barrier.”

“They are letting enemies in but not allies?” Amanda said sharply. That was something someone would only do with a plan of some sort.

“So it seems,” Batman said severely. “Estimates of the number of lives lost have reached the hundreds. No further information.”

“Anyone have anything else to add?” Superman asked the table. Nobody answered. “Then we shall proceed with threat assessment. Please note that the Elden Lord is an extinction-level entity due to its size alone. By that token, it should be treated cautiously and not antagonized if possible.”

“Something the League did before consulting the UN,” Fury pointed out.

“They had limited time and information,” Captain America rose to his friend’s defence. “Given the situation, we would not be dealing with this headache if they could prevent the Elden Lord from arriving at the earth. The initial plan was to open diplomatic channels. Ranni’s intervention was completely unpredictable and led to escalation.”

“But they couldn’t prevent it from landing,” Amanda joined Fury’s argument. She

actually agreed with the League's actions. Earth was not a pit stop for every alien out there, and stopping it off-planet would have been ideal. Still, pressure on the League's failure indirectly strengthened her negotiation position. "Now we have a sleeping dragon in our backyard, which you all pissed off."

"Whether the League's actions were appropriate or not is not the topic of this meeting," Superman said, interrupting a potential argument before it got off the ground. "As mentioned, the Dragon is an extinction-level threat. That being said, it has displayed the ability to project an avatar while its main body rests in place. This is probably due to how inconvenient its size is in daily life and interacting with natives. Our current theory is that it lands on a planet, finds some way to assume the form of the main species to integrate itself with them and recruits its desirable members. It has been to earth before, after the Grecian heroic age, where it recruited Medea, Scathach, and an unknown Amazon that we only know about because of Ranni's comments to Wonder Woman."

"Have we heard from Themyscria?" Fury asked.

"We have not," Batman said. "With Wonder Woman… indisposed, communication has cut off for the moment."

"We can communicate and interact with the Elden Lord's avatar," Superman continued when Batman stopped. "That is the main focus of this meeting. What are the PRT's current classifications for it?"

"Based solely on what we have observed and deduced," Amanda bit out, not happy that the hero was shifting the topic, even if he was technically correct. "We have assigned these tentative ratings to the avatar of the Elden Lord, Mikael. Mover 7+, Brute 3+, Master 11+, Thinker 6+, Striker 5+, Trump 15+, and Stranger 3+. It should be noted that we have not seen the Elden Lord engage in any conflict. We have no idea how he fights, his combat abilities, or how he operates with his 'consorts'. All consorts are categorized as Mover 3+, Brute 3+, Thinker 4+, and Trump 6+ until further notice. Individual abilities will vary between them. Of note, Glynda is a 9+ Shaker, Yoruichi is an 8+ Mover, Scathach is a 7+ Brute, and Ranni is a Master/Striker/Trump 8+. All the pluses indicate the abilities are probably higher rated than recorded."

"And those are the only ones we know about," Fury sighed.

It was hard not to feel scared by those numbers. They were rated on the risk they posed to a skilled team of PRT responders. Strictly speaking, it wasn't the high numbers that were the problem. Many villains had even more egregious ratings. Superman was a Brute 10, and Batman a Thinker 9 by the PRT. That were just two of many heroes the world had to offer, and only some of their ratings.

The real problem was twofold.

The number of people under the Elden Lord and the unknown nature of their actual limits.

Even if they never discovered any other ‘consorts’ and the group didn’t have any other hidden cards, the fact was that they had a potentially unlimited force. Mikael’s ability to resurrect people meant they would never be outnumbered. It was like a worse version of the Fairy Queen, who only ‘resurrected’ powers in the shape of users and was hard-locked to 3.

Mikael did not have that limit and thus the higher Trump rating. The only reason the Master rating wasn’t higher was that he hadn’t shown a direct method of control over those he resurrected than simply holding their lives in his hands.

So far, at least.

More than that, as mentioned, the group had never been in a severe conflict. The few skirmishes with Rhino and Wolverine showed that even some decently powerful Supers would be easily handled.

Everyone at this table would rather deal with a powerful entity whose abilities were known than a weaker unknown variable.

“That generally matches the League’s evaluation,” Batman said. “We have also investigated the nature of the Dark Moon. As of now, there are no indications of any abilities or effects caused by its presence. The most common explanation by our magic and divine specialists is that it is simply a symbol of Ranni that appears wherever she is. Something common to gods, though its size and widespread nature, means she is very powerful. If she were actively using it in some fashion, we would know immediately and try to counteract it. We placed her at a 9+ due to the risks instead of an 8.”

“Any disagreements,” Superman asked the table and continued when no one spoke up. “Then those shall be the provisional ratings until further information is gained. What shall the operating procedures for interacting with the Elden Lord and his consorts?”

“Friendly,” Captain America said immediately. “Not only has he not engaged in any hostilities unless provoked, but he has also shown a disposition for heroics rather than villainy. Until such time as shown otherwise, we should treat them as potential heroes.”

“That is naive,” Amanda said in response. “Not only does it disregard the potential threat they pose, but it also ignores the worlds he destroyed. We have yet to learn about his goals beyond his desire to meet someone on earth. For all we know, he will destroy the planet and move on once he does. We also need to consider his willingness to operate outside the law. The Justice League and the Protectorate can only exist within the bounds of the laws they are beholden to. He has made no overtures for diplomacy and has galavanted as he wishes. We need to consider countermeasures when he inevitably takes

action villainously."

"That is under the assumption there are actions we can take," Green Lanter pointed out. "No matter what we have done, nothing we did while facing him proved successful."

"Because we were unprepared and flew off half-cocked," Amanda insisted. "Once we can figure out his ability to dimensionally shift and counteract it, we will be on an even playing field."

"It would be stupid to antagonize him before then," Fury said. "We have to treat this like the end of WWII. He is the US with nuclear weapons we do not have. He can destroy us without retaliation."

"Mutually assured destruction?" Rogers asked with a frown. "That is an extreme option, especially if he finds out we were researching how to 'nuke' him. Remember, he has been to earth before. Possibly multiple times, even. He didn't destroy the world then, and there is no indication he intends to now. He could be a great help with the Endbringers as well. We would lose out on a massive advantage if we antagonize him needlessly."

Everyone at the table grimaced at the mention of the Endbringers. They had all lost friends and family to the beasts, and the Elden Lord was the only one to have killed one so far.

"We cannot forget the popular support he is enjoying," Green Lantern pointed out. "People from all over the world travel to the outskirts of his pocket dimension. There are festivals named after him. I've only been back for a few days, but I have seen people half-worshiping him. He was already seen favourably due to the Simurgh but with his most recent stunt talk of him is almost deific. If we are seen antagonizing him recklessly and pointlessly, I fear we could have revolts in the streets." His point was countered by a surprising source.

"We cannot let his 'followers' interfere with this decision," Batman said. "What is the threat he poses, and what do we do about it? That is all we should be accounting for. The duty of the League has always been the safety of humanity, even if humanity doesn't want it. We have already established he is a threat to humanity, good-natured or not. We have to treat him as such."

Amanda was surprised by the Bat's interjection. Despite being intelligent and secretive, the caped crusader tended to side with the more merciful decisions due to morality issues. The slight widening of Fury's eyes also showed that the director of SHIELD was surprised by his hard-line stance.

"A foreign power," Fury repeated. "One with launch codes. Maintain basic diplomacy, limited engagement if possible, until we can deal some damage in the event of a conflict.

We don't have to treat him like an enemy, but we should be prepared if he becomes one. We simply know too little now."

"Hope for peace but preparing for war ensures that war is inevitable," Captain America pointed out. "That being said, I cannot disagree about knowing too little." There were noises of affirmation from around the table.

"Then we can agree that gather information remains the priority?" Superman asked, and everyone agreed.

With a baseline established, the rest of the meeting passed without too many issues. They went into more detail on individual 'consorts' and drafted a primary 'first contact' procedure for when any of their groups met the Elden Lord or any of his group.

"Unless anyone has anything to add, we shall adjoin here." When nobody spoke up, Superman nodded. "Then we shall meet again at the summit with any further discoveries. In case of emergency, please contact the League for help."

Nobody at the table believed there wouldn't be another incident before the UN Summit after New Year. Their world wasn't so convenient to let months go without some sort of disaster. On top of that, the next Endbringer attack was expected in another month and a half or so.

Amanda stood up with the others. Superman pulled Batman off to the side, Green Lantern left for home, and Rogers started talking to Fury. She just walked out of the building and the Hall of Justice.

She had to stop by Cadmus on top of her usual duties as Director of the PRT. There was work to do today.

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"Go home, Clark," Batman said as he typed away at his terminal.

The cowled hero had always been curt, even rude at times, but recently his manners had gone further downhill. Most probably didn't notice, but Clark was Bruce's best friend, and they had worked closely together for years.

While most would think it was due to an ongoing issue with the Elden Lord, Clark knew it had originated long before.

"I've ignored it for the last few months," Clark said seriously, verifying that nobody was around before continuing. "But you need to tell me what is going on with you."

"Nothing is going on with me," Batman did not even pause in his typing.

"Really?" Clark said doubtfully. "So you didn't just recommend we ignore the wishes of a good portion of humanity? That we attack someone unprovoked? That we get rid of

our one shot at destroying the Endbringers?"

"The Justice League does not work on the whims of humanity but based on preserving it. Attacking the Elden Lord was not my argument. Investigating the means to do so was. And with the knowledge of the Cores, we do not need the Elden Lord to destroy the Endbringers." Batman said all that with barely a thought, still not looking at Superman as he worked on his project, a new base for the League.

They were all excellent points and perfectly in keeping with Batman's modus operandi.

They also were just excuses.

"You called me Clark."

Batman stopped typing.

The Hall of Justice was the public-facing headquarters of the League. It was as secure as they could make it while staying available to the public.

That being said, it wasn't completely safe.

Secret identities were paramount to the safety of the heroes' loved ones. Superman and Batman had nasty enemies who would stop at nothing to hurt them. Because of that, it was common practice to never use personal names in the Hall.

For Batman, of all people, to call him Clark in a meeting room with recording equipment, even if he could edit it later, meant something was seriously wrong.

"I've ignored it for the last few months," Clark said as Batman made no move to speak. "I know how you operate and when you are on a case. You've been moving behind the scenes since May, and I want to know what about."

"As you said," Batman resumed typing. "It's a case."

"One that requires you to talk to every pre-cog you can find? I didn't say anything when you met Madame Web, Blindfold, or Destiny. I didn't even say anything when you went out of your way to find Circe or Morgaine. But ever since the Elden Lord appeared, you have not been yourself, and it has worsened in the last few days. Whatever this case is, tell us so we can help."

"Go home, Superman," Batman repeated. "I'm sure your family is waiting for you."

"They'll understand if I tell them I am worried about my friend." While Bruce could be incredibly stubborn, so could Clark.

Especially about his friends.

For minutes they stood there, Batman typing away at the blueprints for the space station and Superman staring down at his friend, willing him to understand this wasn't something he would budge on. The only break was when he waved goodbye to Steve and promised to invite him for dinner one of these days.

It took half an hour of being alone in the room, but eventually, Batman made a decision.

“Six months ago, I collaborated on a project with Parker Industries. One designed to allow us to fight the Simurgh. We called it the Clairvoyant.”

“So we could predict her as she predicts us,” Superman could see the logic. The problem with facing the Simurgh had always been the difference in information.

How do you fight someone who knows precisely what you will do?

“We never got the chance to try and deploy it in the field,” Batman continued. “We did test it extensively. It can’t be perfect, but we have determined what it predicts will happen 99.999% of the time.” Superman let out a low whistle. For a man-made device, that was incredible.

“So you’ve been meeting with pre-cogs to refine it,” Clark now understood why Bruce had been talking with Watchdog almost daily for the last few weeks.

“No,” Batman refuted. “There will always be uncertainty when it comes to prophesy. That is simply how the world works. The only problem the clairvoyant faces is its power requirement. You can only use it daily with the equivalent of a Dyson sphere. We have been able to use Arc-reactor technology to streamline it to a degree and receive predictions once a month or so. We are still working on shortening the intervals while asking questions when it is charged. In May, we asked it when the next League member was going to die.”

Clark tensed, not liking where this was going.

“It said that Superman would die before the end of the year.”

A wealth of conflicting emotions filled the Kryptonian.

Disbelief due to the unexpected answer.

Relief that it was he and not his friends who were in danger.

Fear. A cold fear he rarely felt due to his abilities. There were very few threats that could harm him.

“Once we heard that, we took steps to gather more information,” Batman continued his voice grave. “We not only consulted with pre-cogs and clairvoyants but also predictive thinkers. Only some future tellers have applicable abilities, and the Endbringers are a blank spot for many, but we could not disprove the clairvoyant even after talking to all of them.”

“That’s what you think would do it,” Clark realized, his voice sounding oddly calm even to his ears. “The Endbringer attack at the end of the year.”

“Initially,” Batman gave a tiny nod. “We continued to question the device when we could. We narrowed it down to late November, and the cause of death would be brute

force. We also determined that over fifty heroes and tens of thousands of civilians would die on the same day. The Endbringers were the most likely suspect."

"Were," Clark noticed Bruce's word choice.

"Were," Batman nodded again. "When the Elden Lord entered our dimension, all magical forms of clairvoyance stopped working. The magic community is calling it the Blinding. We only know it was caused by the Dragon because of Dr. Fate and Dr. Strange."

"That's good, isn't it? No prophecy, no fate, no problem."

"Predictive models still work," Batman bluntly answered. "Watchdog's thinkers and the clairvoyant still function because they use mathematical models, not magic. We tested. More than that, the predicted time frame has shifted. It is now supposed to happen sooner."

"…when?" Clark asked softly, his mouth dry.

"Within the next week," Batman said just as softly.

"What? A week! You've known all this time, and you only tell me now!" Clark started to pace, head spinning.

Some might feel surprised at the sight of Superman panicking, but he was still a man. A man who could feel fear and who had just heard his best friend tell him he had a week to live.

It was hard not to feel angry at Bruce, even if they were friends. He knew Batman was secretive, but this was not something he should have kept quiet.

"We initially still had a month left," Batman defended.

"If not for the Elden Lord… That is why you are so harsh on him. You think he will kill me!"

"We were able to determine the threat was extraterrestrial in nature, called The Ultimate, and it has destroyed worlds before."

"The title is different, but everything else could be the Elden Lord," Clark could see the logic. Elden Lord was but one of many titles Ranni had called Mikael. It wasn't unreasonable to think he had others, possibly from different cultures. "You must have investigated more than just that. Weaknesses, ways to mitigate the damage and lessen the loss of life."

"We did. We are aware of no weaknesses, though the best way to reduce loss of life is immediate evacuation using all available hands." Batman almost said more, but he paused, lips pursed.

"No more secrets," Superman said seriously, seeing his hesitance. Batman finally spoke after a moment. There was a deep sadness in his voice, one Clark had only heard when the man spoke of his parents.

“You win.”

Two words.

Two words, telling Clark so much.

Though he would die, he would emerge victorious in the end. At the cost of his life, he would end a threat that destroyed worlds and killed thousands of innocent people.

More than that, it told Clark that only he could do it.

Batman was smart. He would have considered sending Clark off-world or trapping him to protect him. Keeping him from danger had probably been his first thought. Most likely, all these further consultations with prophets and clairvoyants had been searching for a way to achieve victory without Superman.

In other words, if Clark didn’t fight, if he didn’t die, then they wouldn’t win.

Or win at such costs that it wasn’t worth it.

The two friends stood in charged silence for a moment, a doom hanging between them.

The silence was interrupted by a ringing.

Batman’s wrist-mounted computer blinked a grey light in rapid succession. The caped crusader frowned at Clark.

“Answer it,” Superman said.

The fact it was ringing at all meant it was an emergency. Most of Batman’s communications were set to silent to not break stealth if he was in the field. With a look that spoke volumes at his friend, Bruce lifted his gauntlet and pressed a few buttons. A holographic image of a masked face hovered in the air.

“Nightwing,” Bruce said simply to his former protege and current leader of the Teen Titans, the branch of the protectorate in San Fransico.

“Batman,” the former Robin said to his mentor. “We have a lead on the Elden Lord.” Both League members tensed.

“Explain,” Batman said as he sat back at his console and linked up his gauntlet. Superman followed, looking over his shoulder at the younger hero on the screen.

“Superman,” the young man nodded to the Kryptonian in greeting before looking back to Bruce. “I wasn’t the one who found it. Beast Boy was. I’ll let him explain.”

The image on the screen shifted slightly, and soon the heroes were looking at a young man with green skin. The shapeshifter had clearly not expected the shift and was staring at the screen with wide eyes.

“Dude,” he said, looking off-screen at, presumably, Nightwing. “Not cool.”

“Report,” Batman said bruskly, not in the mood for delays.

“Yes, s-sir, Batman, sir,” Beast Boy snapped his attention back to the screen as he

stuttered out his words.

“Relax,” Clark said, a smile on his face despite himself. “Nightwing said you found some information on the Elden Lord?”

“Right, I mean, I did, Superman, sir,” the young hero nodded his head rapidly as he answered.

“What did you discover and how,” Batman asked bluntly.

“Right, so, uh,” Beast Boy paused, face flushing in embarrassment. “Are two familiar with, uh, streaming?” Clark blinked in confusion. Like water streams? Or was he talking about news streams? “I mean, uh, like, video gaming streams? Like, somebody is playing a game and recording themselves doing it?”

“I am familiar with the concept,” Batman said plainly. Left unsaid was to hurry up and explain.

“Right, so, uh, a few days ago, I found a new streamer by accident. I mean, I was bored, and she was seriously cute, and she could sing and she was a mutant, which is rare in streaming, so she started getting pretty popular pretty quickly. It’s only been a few days, and she has, like, a thousand followers, which is pretty good. She has this whole noble lady thing going on. Talks like one of those old plays, ya know? Real Shakespeare stuff. It’s kind of neat. Old and new. Noble Nerd, someone called it once.” Beast Boy babbled on, a slight stutter in his voice.

“Beast Boy,” they heard Nightwing sigh.

“Right, right. So anyway, she is getting pretty popular, and she streams a lot, so I was watching her show last night and, at one point, she says Medea’s at her door.” The two League members tensed at the name, but the green hero babbled. “I saw the video, you know, the one in the park, so I was like, ‘no way is that the same Medea!’ And I was right! It turned out to be her cat, who was named Medea. But it got me curious, see. And then today, right, I was playing Super Smash Super while watching her stream, and she was answering questions and stuff. Anyway, somebody asked if she was single, right? And she says she’s married. Which is cool, ya know? Good for her. But the internet is hard on girls in gaming, like, they were bugging her. Asking her all sorts of questions and stuff. Anyway, she said her husband was named Mikael, and he was also a singer, and I was all like, ‘this is just another coincidence!’ But then, uh, it’s probably best I show you.”

A link appeared on the terminal that Bruce clicked on, the screen splitting to show the young hero on one side and a video on the other. The video was marked as ‘live’ though it was rewound to a certain point and paused. Clark didn’t recognize the website, so it was likely one of those dedicated to ‘streaming’.

A pale woman was on the screen, holding a game controller and sitting at a desk. She

was covered in a thick white robe, hiding most of her form. Her complete profile wasn't in view, but her face was visible. She had long white hair, and her eyebrows were tiny ridges of horns. Scales dotted her face and hands.

Batman unpaused the video.

"What say thee, chat?" The mutant said, putting her controller down. "Shall we begin another venture? I hath heard tell of a new fighter. Dawn of Justice, I believe it is called." She paused, looking at her screen as chat messages flowed. "I see thee wish to hear me sing once more? Very well. I must get in my daily practice, lest I disappoint Sir Bard." The draconic woman stood up, revealing a fur-covered tail peeking out from below her robe, and shifted the camera to focus on a microphone beside the desk.

"That's what she calls her husband most of the time," Beast Boy piped up helpfully. "Sir Bard. Supposedly he is the one who taught her to sing. She wants to be a singer, and she says streaming is a way to be a 'modern bard'."

"What melody shall we sing today?" The woman asked herself as she fiddled with a tablet. "Hm, tis a duet. I shall save it for later. Ah, this one is fitting of my mood."

Music started, a tune Clark was unfamiliar with, and the dragon woman started to hum. She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by a door knocking before she could.

"Please enter," she called out, pausing the music.

"Hey Priscilla, I brought lunch since you missed it. Have you seen Melina? Ranni said she saw you with her earlier, and I need to talk to her." A voice asked from off-screen. A familiar voice, one Clark had heard dozens of times from rewatching the park video.

"Lady Melina has left me three hours hence," the draconic woman said. "I believe she intends to head inland to the drake mountains with the children."

"Alright, I'll head there." The voice said, getting closer.

"My thanks, Sir Bard. Please set it upon the desk."

"Sure," the man said, walking into view of the camera and setting a plate of food on the desk.

The Elden Lord looked almost exactly as he did from the park. He was wearing shorts and a floral print shirt with his chest exposed. He didn't look like the man who would kill Superman but like someone enjoying a vacation in the tropics.

He also looked tiny, everything in the room towering over him by a few feet at least.

The chat was going absolutely insane, flying by at speeds Superman could barely follow. Clearly, the heroes were not the only ones who recognized the man.

"Hm?" He asked, looking at the desk and the computer. "What's this? The project you were working on?"

“My setup,” the draconic woman waved a hand at the computer even as she picked up a sandwich from the food platter.

“Is that a live chat? Are you… streaming this?” He asked in disbelief.

“I talked with Victoria while she was here. She had many ideas on how to become a bard on this world. While I desire to one day ‘see my name in lights’, as she put it, this was the most expedient method as it only required what the Mansion could provide.”

“Ugh,” Mikael groaned, palming his face in his hands. “I just finished spanking Ranni, and now I need to spank Glory Girl too. It’s one thing after another.” He started chuckling under his breath in disbelief.

“Sir Bard? Mikael?” Priscilla asked down at the man, looking concerned. “Hath I done something wrong?”

“No, no, you wouldn’t know. Besides, it’s too late now.” The man nodded to himself as if coming to a decision. Removing his hands from his face, he looked at the camera with a charismatic smile. “Hello world, I am Mikael. Priscilla’s husband.”

Between one second and the next, the Elden Lord grew. Before, he was a hobbit in a human’s house. Now, he was the same size as the draconic woman.

“So you better not bother too much, m’kay? Only I can do that.”

“Sir Bard!” Priscilla exclaimed, her face red with embarrassment.

“What?” He asked with a teasing smile, grabbing her hands in his. “Better stake my claim now. This is the internet, after all. Can’t have them getting any ideas. And I can’t have you forgetting poor little old me when you are a rich and famous superstar. You’re my Floof-Dragon. That means no bulli from you, chat! Yes, that means you, Bruce!”

Batman tensed, his hands almost cracking the keyboard.

“Of whom do you speak, my dear?” Priscilla asked, looking at the computer.

“Hm? Oh, nobody, in particular, just a little prank. Statistically speaking, somebody named Bruce is bound to watch this someday if they aren’t watching it now. I bet I really freaked them out right now.”

“Thou art too much,” the draconic woman sighed though she did lean into his touch slightly. “Wouldst thou sing with me? I found a duet we have yet to sing. I hath told my followers that thou art the better performer, and they doubt my words. As well as thy existence.”

“Can’t have that, can we,” he said with a smile. “One song, then I have to go find Melina.”

“Yay,” Priscilla pulled the Elden Lord to the microphone with an exclamation of small joy and showed him her song choice.

“This one?” The Elden Lord asked as a guitar appeared in his hands from nowhere. “I

like it, but it is a bit morbid."

"It suits thy voice," Priscilla explained. "I know thee prefer the deeper tones to higher notes."

"Fair enough," the man in a Hawaiian shirt started to strum his instrument. "Since this is the first time for this song, we can do it a few times to get it right before I leave. Jump in on the chorus."

"She put him out like the burnin' end of a midnight cigarette
She broke his heart. He spent his whole life tryin' to forget
We watched him drink his pain away a little at a time
But he never could get drunk enough to get her off his mind
Until the night,"

He sang beautifully, hands down the best Clark had ever heard. He put so much emotion in his voice, such raw sadness and wistfulness that the Kryptonian would believe him if he said he wrote the song himself. Priscilla's lighter voice, contrasting with the Elden Lord's deep baritone, sang of guilt, of longing long gone.

Though the two heroes were watching the video to learn more about the Elden Lord, who clearly did not expect this to happen, they were nonetheless entranced by the performance.

Clark didn't know who Bruce thought of, but the song brought images of Lois and Jon to his mind. Of his wife and child.

His family.

His family he would leave behind if he were to die at the hands of the man on the screen.

"We laid her next to him beneath the willow
While the angels sang a whiskey lullaby
La, la, la, la, la, la, la
La, la, la, la, la, la, la."

The couple, perfectly in tune with each other, did not need more than one take. As the song wound to a close, Bruce finally spoke.

"Go home, Clark," he repeated.

This time, Clark did as his friend recommended.

Author's Note:

So this chapter? It was initially all one scene at the end of the last one. Then it grew and grew and grew, and here we are, 9K later.

As mentioned, finally turning our attention to some more comic plotlines and touching base with some well-known characters. For those who've read the comics, some of the stuff hinted at here is familiar to you, though I will warn everyone against thinking everything is the same. I'm still playing with perspectives, trying to flesh out those who are essential to the story, not just the SI.

My addiction to foreshadowing continues. Some of the groundwork I've set up in this chapter is critical for the entire fic. Will anyone get all the hints I laid out before the end of volume 3? I'm excited. I think we have two more chapters in Emancipation before the next Part of Volume 2.

I'll see you all next Friday.

EMANCIPATION VI

And he said
"I went skydiving
I went Rocky Mountain climbing
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fumanchu
And I loved deeper
And I spoke sweeter
And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying"
And he said
"Someday I hope you get the chance
To live like you were dying"

"There you are," I called out as I landed on the cliff, folding my wings away as I approached the seated woman. I winced internally as she flinched at my voice, though I didn't let it show on my face.

This was going to be an awkward conversation as it was.

"My Lord," Melina nodded in greeting though she kept her eye skyward.

The young drakes, Hengeron II, Llamrei II, Andromeda, and Cassandra, were all flying in the skies above. Melina was watching them fly around and 'play' with drakes that called the mountains home.

At this point, very little on the Island could threaten them, but they were still young enough that it was better to have someone there to keep an eye on them. Though they were initially the same as other drakes from the Dragon Aerie, they had been fed a steady supply of my blood over the last year. Despite being 'infants' less than a year old, they were all tier 7 and towered over their fellows.

I sat beside her while we watched Hengeron II, the group's only male, dive towards a nearby valley and return with a squealing boar in his talons. Rather than kill and eat the creature, the group amused themselves by dropping it, diving, and catching it before it hit the ground. My cat was a negative influence on them.

Unfortunately, Cassandra missed a grab, and the creature fell to the ground with a meaty spat. Neither of us even winced at the sight, well used to worse visuals.

I kept waiting for her to say something, anything really.

I should have known better.

In our relationship, I had always been the one to engage Melina, not the other way around.

It was the first relationship of its kind for me, as I was usually the one who kept my own company. It just went to show how desperate I had been for someone, anyone, to be

with me by the time I reached Elden Ring.

Still, my feelings for her were not so shallow as to ignore her now that I wasn't alone 99% of the time.

"You've been avoiding me," I said after minutes of silence.

She didn't answer, continuing to stare skyward.

Even though I had noticed her odd behaviour right away, I had given her space for the last month and a half while I searched for a way to get my body back. I had also hoped she would use this time to connect with the other women, but she had maintained her distance from everyone but Ranni and, to a lesser extent, Priscilla.

I had initially assumed her reticence was caused by an awkwardness with the other women on the Island. They had been together for a year and had formed a tight bond of friendship and, in some cases, intimacy. Watching them in the Dream had been like watching a slice-of-life anime sitcom filled with high jinks, rivalries, twists and turns, and a good helping of lust.

After my… talk with Ranni, I knew that was only one tiny facet of Melina's internal struggle.

She had died.

I knew I was the odd one out when it came to my casual disregard for my own deaths. While I didn't know if Melina had ever perished in the Lands Between while the Rune of Death was sealed, her death was final when she burned upon the fires of the Fell God.

And she had done it willingly.

On top of the fact she had been dead for decades, Melina had awoken in an unfamiliar world surrounded by foreign women. She had found out her lover had been lying to her by omission and that her sacrifice, one at a high cost to herself, had been almost meaningless.

There was a lot to grapple with and I, more than most, understood that sometimes people just needed time.

But I also understood that talking things out like adults could solve most issues before they festered.

And I was not willing to let Melina go without a fight.

"Ranni tells me you have been having nightmares," I tried a different tactic. Andromeda decided that one of the blue drakes was her new best friend and was flying beside it. The smaller beast, nowhere near as intelligent, flipped out and tried to fly away, leading to a merry little chase. "Wanna talk about them?"

After a few more moments of silence, I opened my mouth to prod her again when she spoke.

"I dream of the Forge," Melina said softly. Though her one eye was gazing skyward, I

doubted she saw any flying monsters. “Of the Flames. I feel my skin blister and crackle. Smoke fills my lungs, and I scream and scream, but you can’t hear.”

I flinched once more, this time in guilt and phantom pain.

“Sometimes I awake when the flames consume me,” she continued slowly. “All the pain leaves then. I am at peace. Dead. Most of the time, I continue to dream. I dream of Death. She extends a hand to me, and I know what she offers. Life and pain. Death and peace. I must choose. In my dreams, I turn away. Every time. I rest in peace, and you burn. You live, yet the fire never goes out. And I watch you burn.”

“What can I say? I’m hot,” I tried to lighten the mood a little with a joke, but she didn’t laugh. I slid closer to her till I pressed up against her side and warp an arm around her shoulder. She leans into me, though her eyes remain on the sky. In the past. “You didn’t turn away, though. You took Death’s hand. You came back to me. I cannot express how much that means to me.”

“I came back a fool to a fool,” she snorted disparagingly. “I made a pointless sacrifice. I was so convinced that my purpose was to die so my Lord might live that I tossed myself upon the pyre without need or meaning. Indeed, falling in love with you was the most foolish thing I have ever done. I feel like a right jester.”

“I was the worse fool,” I said bitterly. “If I only trusted you and told you everything, things would have been different. I was so afraid, afraid of losing control, of losing myself, that I lost you instead. Make no mistake, I will never forgive you for leaving me, but I won’t forgive myself either. If anyone is a jester, it is me. In fact, I think Ranni’s called me that a few times already.”

“You could stand to hold thy tongue more, ‘tiss true,” Melina nodded, and I allowed myself to smile. If she could take digs at me, then things were looking up. But then she shook her head again. “But it renders my action no more meaningful. I died without true purpose and hurt us both in the doing. My entire existence, I have been searching for meaning. Why was I given life by my mother? What was my purpose? Even as I tossed off her yoke of expectation, even as I dedicated myself to a new Lord, every action was but a failure in the end. All the pain I suffered, all the pain I inflicted, twass pointless.”

“Pointless?” I asked rhetorically. “Was I heartbroken? Certainly. Pissed off? Definitely! But not once did I think your sacrifice or death was pointless.”

She looked at me, finally, with her one open eye, almost accusing me of using empty words to comfort her. I never did find out what was up with her and Ranni’s eyes, but it didn’t matter. Melina, while no Godfrey, was more a warrior than most. She did not want platitudes.

I needed to convince her that I wasn’t spouting bullshit. Which was difficult since

most of what came out of my mouth was bullshit. Or jokes. Or puns… or teasing.

The point was, I needed to convince her that my words weren't empty. That I meant everything, I was saying.

To do so, I needed to do something I hated. I needed to lower my defences, the emotional, non-supernatural ones. The shields of humour and bluster, masks and deceit I had built all my life.

I needed to be genuine.

Vulnerable.

I hated that. It left me raw and exposed.

But Melina was worth it.

"What do you know about my experience in the other worlds. The ones I was trapped in before the Lands Between?" I rested my chin on her head as I pulled her closer.

It was now I who couldn't look at her, and this story was long.

"Not too many details," Melina admitted, her voice curious at the sudden change in topic. "I have spent little time with your other consorts. I understand the Lands Between was the fourth realm you visited since your cursing. You were skilled because you had conquered the challenges of the previous three worlds. I know you were cursed with undeath even then, though of a different sort than that afflicted by Marika's Order. I know you slew a Godking of Sun and Lightning in your first world and were bathed in the divine flames. That is why you would be able to maintain your sanity even if you had accepted the Giant's Flame in my place."

"That's the gist of it, though I have to correct a few things."

Even as my mind drifted back to days, I would instead not remember, my hands idly toyed with a small pyromancy flame.

A long-gone habit. One from when it was just me against a dying world, I struggled to maintain my sanity every day. Knowing now that I had put safeguards in place didn't lessen any of the fear I felt then.

I loved fire.

I hated fire.

Pyromancy had saved my ass so many times early in my incarceration that it wasn't even funny. As I grew more and more skilled as the years dragged on, my Talents given time to flourish, I relied on it less and less.

"You are right. I would have retained my sanity through the Fell God's Flame. But it wouldn't be a voluntary choice on my part. Because I once stood where you did. I was consumed by the Fires of the First Flame. I burned for who knows how long. Decades at least. Probably centuries. Maybe millennia. I can't tell, but that isn't the point. The point

is, I gave up. All the contingencies I had set up to keep my sanity were useless if I chose to actively give up. While I burned, I tried to discard my sanity, to go hollow. I wanted the pain to disappear, and I would have done anything to end it."

I was not proud of it, of giving up after decades of effort and toil and abandoning the women on the Island to eternal entrapment.

But I was also realistic.

No one in my place could fault me for it when the literal king of gods in that world did the same.

And it was all caused by my ego, my hubris in believing the First Flame to be just another fire. I should have walked out of the Kiln, but I had been blinded by the idea that I only needed to die one more death before being Free. To this day, I wonder if walking away was possible or if burning had been required, but I expected it wasn't since both cases needed me to wait a certain amount of time.

Diana's 'order' had saved me.

Even as I grew to love her, a small part of me would always resent her for it.

"I've never hidden that aspect of my journey from anyone," I said. "It was my failing, my ego, and my pain. It has shaped me into who I am today and given me the strength to carry on."

"I am not so strong," Melina said bitterly. "I burned for a few minutes, and it haunts me."

"I don't believe in comparing pain," I shook my head lightly, careful not to dig into her scalp with my chin. "Everyone goes through their own lives, faces their own trials, and faces their own losses. Did what happen to me suck? Yes, but it doesn't detract from you in any way. Besides, if we are talking about the hardest things I've ever done, burning in the First Flame after killing Gwyn is… fourth place, I think. Barely top five."

"What was the most difficult," she asked morbidly.

"Getting over you," I said softly, looking down at her. She flushed slightly, a rare sight that made me grin. "Number two was letting Emma into my mind to wake me up. I was only able to do so because I had done worse before. Number three is… number three is the reason I have never thought of your sacrifice as pointless." I paused, remembering we were not completely alone.

"Hm?"

I ignored Melina's questioning sound and turned to look at my shadow.

"Raven," I said, and my shadow waved at me. "I know how much of a chatterbox and a gossip you are." It flipped me the finger. "But keep what you hear a secret from the others, okay?" My shadow flashed me a thumbs-up.

For some reason, whenever I talked to her in my shadow like this, she was always so expressive.

“Why keep it a secret?” Melina asked.

“Because I lied to them about it,” I explained. “And all explaining it would do would make them feel bad. I am only telling you because it proves my point that your sacrifice wasn’t pointless.” I took a deep breath, filling my nose with her scent. “If burning in fires of the First Flame were the fourth hardest thing I ever did, it is because choosing to burn a second time in them was so much worse.”

She stilled.

“Those first three worlds all followed the same rules, more or less. They were a trilogy back home. All the stories happened when the Fires of the Flame were dying out. Fire wasn’t just heat and light in that world. It was light, life, and civilization all wrapped up in one. When the fires fade, kingdoms crumble, the dead walk the land, and people are drawn to the flickering flames to serve as kindling to reignite it so the age can continue. For a whole bunch of reasons I won’t get into, the games end in two ways. Once you beat the game, you have two choices. You either burn or you walk away. In my ego, I burned in the first game. For the second, I walked away. Whatever you choose, someone will eventually link the flame, so it doesn’t really matter if it was me or someone else. I was prepared to wait thousands of years if it meant I didn’t have to burn in those fires again.”

“But you went back anyway. Willingly,” Melina said with realization.

“For over four hundred years, I walked the world,” I continued. “I was undead. I did not age, and pain and joy were all muted by my condition. I was unaware that time was shifting on Island at my whim, so I thought the women on the Island had been sitting here for years, waiting for me to free them with no contact. Nevertheless, I was set on avoiding that pain at all costs. Even if it took me thousands of years.”

“What changed?”

“An old friend found me,” I thought back to the Knight of Mirrah. To her begging, her pleading as her kingdom was destroyed because there was no one to link the Flame. The happy end I had promised and delivered turned into another nightmare. “She forced me to face my faults. In clearing the way to the flame for others, I had stripped them of the ability to link it. The core philosophy of that world is that anyone, even the lowest of the low, which has never held a blade in their life, can overcome anything with enough willpower. I had stripped it of its meaning by making the path to the Kiln easy.”

The point of Dark Souls or any Soulsborne game had never been ‘git gud’. That ‘slogan’ was a by-product of people’s pride in their achievements and internet culture being what it is. You did not face Ornstein and Smough, Sir Alonne, the Nameless King,

and the Orphan of Kos because they were easy.

You did it to prove to yourself that, even though you were nothing special, you could stand the equal of gods through your own effort.

“I was left with the same choice once again,” I finished. “Burn or walk away. I would either waste away over thousands of years in the hope that the world would last long enough for someone of sufficient will and power to link the flame. Or, I face the consequences of my actions and follow through on my beliefs. Freedom is not the freedom of consequences. Freedom is having bad choices and living with the consequences of those choices. In a world without meaning, our every choice gives itself meaning. I walked into that fire for a second time because I decided that burning was less painful than losing myself and who I was. That was my choice. I would rather burn for my Freedom than rest my hopes on the whims of fate and chance.”

Of course, at the time, I hadn’t realized my own spiral into a pit of paranoia and nihilism, but even if I had, I would have chosen to burn anyway.

I had never wanted to be a hero, nor did I desire to be perfect.

All I wanted to do was look into a mirror and recognize the man looking back at me.

Something I would have failed to do if not for the woman in my arms.

I pulled her from me to look into her eye, wet with tears. My own eyes weren’t dry either. Though I was talking about myself, because I was an egoist at heart, I willed her to understand that I understood her. I understood the pain and the conviction it took to do what she did.

We both burned so that the world we wished to see would come from the flames.

“It took months to get back to the Kiln. Every single day I would second-guess myself. I dragged my feet. I turned away at least a dozen times. I feared that pain. But I walked into it for my Freedom and my ego. You, also, chose to burn. But you did it for me.” I said with all the emotions I could gather. “I would be here today if not for you. I would have continued to Rot, never genuinely trusting again. This Family would never have come together if not for what you did. Your death did more for me than killing any number of gods. Was it unnecessary to destroy the Erdtree? Possibly. But the necessity of an action does not give it meaning. Only we can provide things with meaning. And you dying for me was the most meaningful thing anyone has ever done for me. And I will never forget nor forgive it.”

There was a pregnant silence, as I finished my monologue and waited to see if it reached her.

“As always, your pep talks leave much to be desired. All I heard was me, me, me, me,” Melina said with a wet chuckle, wiping her eyes. Then she kissed me. Slowly, with a

tenderness that made my heart ache and my pulse quicken. “Thank you.”

“Of course. What are crazy husbands for?” I asked with a smile, surreptitiously wiping my own eyes.

“Though it doesn’t change the fact that I am still purposeless,” she snuggled closer. “The one my mother gave me is long gone, and the one I gave myself is fulfilled. What shall I do with myself?”

“That’s easy,” I said with confidence. This was something I had long practice with. “Live for me!”

“Once more, your ego is only eclipsed by your ability to say things of a most absurd nature,” she sighed, believing I was joking.

I wasn’t.

“I’m serious. Live for me. Live for the Family. Live for yourself. I am doing all three. A purpose is something others can suggest, but only we, ourselves, can decide. That is a Freedom everyone has.” I thought back to Solaire, who chased a sun he would never find. To Alsanna, lonely queen of an empty Ivory Kingdom. To Sirris, standing guard over a small child painting a new world. “If you don’t know how to determine your own purpose, take things one day at a time. We have, quite literally, all the time in the world to define our own purpose.”

“You are right. We have plenty of time.” She paused as if going over things in her head. I didn’t know how old she was, the war of the shattering had gone on for at least a few centuries, but she was definitely older than most on the Island.

“I’m always right,” I said as I stood up and helped Melina to her feet. “Life would be so much easier if everybody just accepted that fact.” She rolled her eye but gave me a fond smile. I didn’t know if this conversation would truly help her, but it was an excellent first step. Now I just needed to fix a few other problems. “You know, now that all the hiding I was doing was rendered pointless, we can move much more openly, right? I was thinking we should all spend some time off the Island.”

“What for,” she asked warily. “I know that look in your eye. You have some manner of scheme in the making.”

“I am affronted,” I said in an over-the-top manner. “That you would think that I, the most innocent and wholesome of beings, would concoct some dastardly scheme! Why I never!” She remained looking at me, one eyebrow raised.

I gave in with a sigh.

“Fine, I do have a bit of a plan. It’s nothing malicious, though. Promise.”

“To me? Or at all?”

“To you,” I clarified. “Maybe not to anyone. It’s just me being paranoid.”

“What is this plan then?”

“So I thought we could all use a vacation, right? It’s been a pretty stressful time all around. This would also give you and Ranni time to get to know some of the others.”

“If you hope for me to jump into bed with them, I am afraid I will have to disappoint.”

“That’s not it at all,” I shook my head. “Sex is not necessary for the Family. While a few of the girls are bisexual or at least have some leaning in that direction, it is not a requirement. Robin tried with Yoruichi and Tsunade and wasn’t a fan. Maybe because she could do everything by herself with her Devil Fruit? Or it could just be a preference thing. I think Raven is almost completely asexual due to the problems with her emotions, though she did have some male partners in the comics. And I don’t know one way or the other about Emma or Ranni if they are attracted to the female form. We don’t all have to lust for each other, but we need to get along. We have a long time to spend together, and I would hate for this divide to remain because of a lack of communication. On both sides.”

“Very well, I shall make more of an effort to talk to your consorts if only for your peace of mind,” she nodded in agreement. “Why outside the Island?”

“That is where my evil plan comes together,” I said, rubbing my hands like a cartoon villain and affecting a nasally voice. “You see, my dear, nothing brings people together quite like a common foe. Just think of Radahn and the Festival of War. In fact,” I paused as a great idea came to me. “Let’s go to Caelid!”

“Caelid? You wish to return to the Lands Between?” Melina asked in disbelief. “It is certainly inhospitable enough to foster companionship, but you despise Caelid. After claiming Radahn’s Great Rune, you swore to never return.”

“What you fail to realize, my dear, is that earth has a Caelid all on its own,” I leaned in to whisper in her ear as if revealing a dark secret. “It has its own massive birds and beasts wishing to tear you limb from limb. Its red sky and oppressive heat are indicative of its maliciousness. Everything there wishes only to inflict the most painful of deaths upon anyone visiting. Ay! Like Caelid, even the grass is deadly! I speak, of course, of Australia!” She deadpanned at me as I grinned at her.

In comics, the most dangerous places in the world were where the superheroes called home. Those cities got destroyed every other day. As a whole, though, I would rate Australia as more dangerous than the Savage Lands. You could shoot a dinosaur but not a blue-ring octopus.

“And why would we wish to go there?”

“Well, for one, it is beautiful,” I said, returning to my regular voice. “The Island has excellent forests and mountains, but it doesn’t have any similar typography to the Land

Down Under. I think most of the Family could do for a bit of a change of pace, don't you? And none of them have been there. Not only that, but it's spring there, so it's not too hot yet. The large cities have some great attractions too. Ranni, Robin, Glynda and Priscilla might be interested in catching a show at the Opera House in Sidney. We can do a few people at a time, giving you a chance to get to know them. All in all, it makes a great place for a vacation. You know, if you are immune to everything that will kill you that lives there. Witch is everything."

"And the other reason?" She asked, waiving her hand as if telling me to get on with it. I love how sassy she became after spending so long with me. "None of your plans are ever simple."

"I already told you," I said with a smirk. "A common enemy. Now that my face is known worldwide, I give it half a day before we are recognized. Local heroes, villains, and certainly the Justice League will all come running. While diplomacy would be preferable if it comes to blows, most of Australia is uninhabited. I don't really care about collateral damage, but most of the others are more heroic than me. We can go wild without worry."

There was also the tiny, hidden goal of keeping an eye on Melina. Trauma did not disappear overnight. Just because I was unconcerned about my deaths didn't mean that others were the same. Most went hollow after only one or two deaths.

"And do you have another reason you won't tell the others?"

"My inner chuuni really likes the idea of going to the world's asshole and being the most dangerous thing there," I admitted without shame.

I had my fill for the day being genuine, emotional and vulnerable.

I wanted to be a ham, damnit!

I had been too emo for too long! I demand silliness!

Live was too long to spend it all being miserable.

******

Miles away, Robin wiped her eyes and picked up her book from where it had fallen.

She kept her shrunken ear hidden in Mikael's hair. While she had been able to grow her limbs for years, shrinking them was a relatively new ability.

One of the perks of being Tier 7.

She had been right to worry about the man. He was the 'suffer in silence' type, just like she thought.

For the longest time, she had compared him to Usopp and herself. He was skilled in his own way but prone to dramatics and lies when it suited him. Someone who had grown

over the trials he went through.

That was an aspect of him, but there was one other crewmate she now knew he most resembled.

“Nothing.” He said, taking a deep breath and dislodging the ash accumulated on his body. “Nothing happened.”

Zoro had been a booze hound, an idiot with no sense of direction, and someone with more muscles than brains when it came to anything but swords.

He had also been the best, most devoted and loyal first mate the Strawhats could ever ask for.

Robin toyed with the idea of telling the others what she had heard but ultimately decided to keep her silence on the matter unless it became necessary. Mikeal had too many secrets come out recently. Any more would feel a bit like bullying the man. As someone who liked her own secrets, she could sympathize a bit with his recent struggles.

Even if she did find it a bit funny.

For now, Robin decided to continue her vigil over the man pulling this new Family together.

Besides, a vacation did sound nice. Robin had never been to an Opera before, so it would be a novel experience.

That, and the chance to finally try out her new Conquerers Haki against some of the so-called ‘heroes’ of the world was appealing.

Oh my.

Robin realized she might be more Zoro-like than expected as well.

******

“Thank you for the meal, Lois,” Steve Rogers said as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “It was delicious.”

“You’re welcome,” Lois Kent said as she cleared away the table with Captain America’s aid. The old soldier had been around the house enough times and insisted enough that everyone had gotten used to him helping out.

Usually, Clark would also have helped, but he was occupied with his essential duty.

“Babbaubu,” Jonathan Samuel ‘Jon’ Kent babbled happily as his father bounced him up and down on his knee. It was getting late, and the little tyke had been fed, cleaned and bundled up for bedtime in his superman pyjamas.

Clark smiled, warmth filling him.

No matter what happened, unless the world was literally going to end, he always

made time for his family. His duties as Superman were important, but he felt most happy when he hung up the cape and returned to being Clark Kent, photographer, reporter, friend, husband, and father.

Their cozy home on the outskirts of Metropolis was more a sanctuary than the cold, impartial halls of the Justice League would ever be.

“C’mon, Smallville,” Lois said after watching the pair for a moment. “Justice and the truth never sleep, but this little guy does need to.” Clark reluctantly passed Jon to his mother, the toddler letting out little yawns and pawing at his eyes. “I’ll join you two in a moment.”

“Here,” Steve passed Clark a cold beer as the two retired to the couches in the living room. Both cracked theirs without needing a bottle opener, one of the lesser perks of being a Super. “One of these days, you need to take me to Smallville. Lois still won’t tell me her meatloaf recipe. I should get it from the source. Martha Kent’s cooking is legendary.”

“Ma’d be happy to hear that,” Clark said with a smile. Both his parents, and he, by extension, had been raised on stories of Captain America. Sam Kent, Clark’s grandfather, had fought in the war. While he had never served directly with the ‘first hero’, he had met Steve a few times. He had bragged about it countless times. “Pa would love to meet you.”

Truth, Justice, and the American Way had been his slogan, always taking pride in the nation he lived in and the heroes it fostered.

The national blinders came off as Clark grew up and learned more about the world and America’s actual role and history. But his grandparents’ and parents’ lessons and ideals had stuck with him all these years.

America might not have lived up to its ideals, but that is why it needed symbols.

Symbols like Superman and Captain America.

Clark firmly believed that as long as hope existed and symbols of truth and justice continued to rise, then each succeeding generation would be better off than the last.

That is why he helped create the League. To create a legacy of international cooperation, an institution dedicated to the betterment of humanity that would last for generations.

Even if he wasn’t around to see it.

“Would you do it again?” Clark asked out of nowhere after a few minutes of companionable silence while waiting for Lois to return.

“Pardon?” Steve asked.

“Knowing what you know now,” Clark clarified. “Knowing what it would cost you, would you still have gotten on that bomber?”

“If I could go back in time, I probably would have tried harder to stop it from taking

off in the first place," Steve said with good humour. He took another sip of his beer, looking thoughtful. "I think… I think I would do the same thing again."

"Even though it cost you a chance with Peggy?"

"Even then," Steve nodded somberly. "When I signed that dotted line for enlistment, I knew very well I might not make it back. When I was positioned for the Super Soldier Program, Erkstein was very forthright that the chances of death were high. Every soldier, no matter their nation or cause, should be aware of the risks they take."

"What was going through your mind?" Clark asked morbidly.

"What most people think about," Steve said with a far-off look in his eyes. "I was scared. I didn't want to die. I wanted to see Peggy again, to get the dance we never had. I wanted to see my friends again. To walk the streets of manhattan after the war was over and see the soldiers I had fought beside return to their families."

Many of those same thoughts had swirled around Clark's head for the last few days since Bruce told him of his 'fate'. Superman had rarely truly felt threatened. There had been some close calls, and he had failed a few times, but rarely had his life been in danger despite facing beings stronger than him. It had always been others, the civilians and their livelihoods, that had been what he safeguarded. His few weaknesses were always eclipsed by his strengths or the help of his friends.

A man of steel did not have much to fear from a world of cardboard.

Until now.

"But," Steve continued. "As terrified as I was of death, as much as I wanted to go home, I was faced with a choice. Not a nice one, but a choice nonetheless. We must all live in the real world… and sometimes that world can be pretty grim. But it is the dream… the hope for tomorrow… that makes the reality worth living. I made a personal pledge to uphold the dream, even at the cost of my life. And that is why I would do it again because even today, I am fighting for that dream."

Clark wondered if he, a small-town farmboy, could do the same.

When the moment came, and he saw his death in the face of the Elden Lord, or whoever the Ultimate was, could he die doing what was right?

Could he kill?

"What brought this up?" Steve asked after Clark didn't respond.

He was saved from answering right away when Lois returned from putting Jon to bed. Rather than grab a drink, she sat beside her husband on the couch.

"I swear," she said with a fond smile. "That boy is a work and a half. I blame you, Smallville."

"Why me?" He asked as he pulled her tightly against him, luxuriating in her warmth.

“It’s the Kryptonian in him. I just know it. He won’t fall asleep unless I tell him about Superman or another hero. And god forbid he lay down without his stuffed Batman.”

“You still won’t tell me where you got that,” Steve chimed in with a smile of his own. “It’s not common merch, definitely handmade. A few of the wards are huge batman fans, and Christmas is coming up.”

“Sorry, I promised I wouldn’t say,” Clark responded honestly with a shrug of his shoulders and a humorous look at his wife. It had been a gift from Bruce when Jon was born. The old bat was a colossal softy once you got past his prickly appearance. And demeanour. And paranoia. “I can ask for a few more, though.”

“I would appreciate it.”

“Have you asked him yet?” Lois asked, looking up at her husband.

“I was waiting for you.”

“Ask me what?”

“Well…” Clark dithered, unsure how to broach the topic.

“I’m pregnant.” Lois was always the blunter of the two. It helped in her journalism career, and it helped now.

“Wha… Congratulations!” Steve exclaimed with joy, standing up from his seat.

Clark and Lois remained seated, smiling at the old soldier but not as exuberant.

“That’s not everything,” Steve said after watching their faces for a moment. He sat back down. “Is it?”

“It’s not,” Clark admitted, even as his hands held his wife’s for strength. “I re-We recently got some bad news.” He hurriedly corrected himself at his wife’s dangerous look.

“Are you two all right? “ Captain America asked worriedly.

“We’re fine,” Lois waved away his concern. “Healthy as can be. Jon wasn’t a problem, and we don’t expect any troubles with little Elanor either.”

“Elanor? You already know the gender?”

“Elanor Martha Kent,” Clark said. “We’ve been trying for a while for a second child, and as soon as the test returned positive yesterday, we did extensive checkups to be safe. Kryptonian/human children are still a bit of a grey area.”

“So… Why the long faces? What was the bad news?”

And so, Superman told Captain America of his impending doom. Of how Batman, while trying to find a way to fight the Simurgh, had inadvertently discovered something that would kill the man of steel. Clark explained how he had just learned of this and the impending deadline.

“And you think the Elden Lord will be responsible?” Steve asked. His face had grown more severe with every word spoken.

“He does fit what the profile Batman has,” Clark nodded. “It could be something else. He is just the most likely, and his arrival did push the date forward.”

“And there’s nothing we can do?”

“We are doing all we can currently. Captain Marvel is scouring the galaxy for any mention of The Ultimate. That’s why she hasn’t returned. The Clairvoyant is being supercharged but will only be ready for another question in a week. The PRT, Protectorate, SHIELD, The Guild, Watchdog and the League, and the UN nations, are all on high alert due to the Elden Lord, so they are as ready as they can be without tipping our hand and starting something ourselves. We don’t want a self-fulfilling prophecy on our hands.”

“The Avengers will, of course, be ready to assemble at a moment’s notice. But there has to be something, anything we can do to help.” Steve said, clear frustration in his voice.

“There is,” Clark said seriously. “Something only you can do.”

“What is it?”

“Be Elanor’s godfather,” Lois said seriously. “You’ve been a good friend to us, and should the worst happen, we would feel better if we knew her future was in your hands.”

“You wouldn’t be alone,” Clark hurried to clarify as Steve sat in stunned silence. “Batman and Diana are Jon’s godparents, and my parents would help out, but I would feel more secure if I knew I could count on you.”

“I am honoured,” Steve eventually said, face set. “Of course, I agree. But don’t go talking like that. Hope never dies so long as we live. I will ensure you are around for that child’s birth. Prophecy or not. Elden Lord be damned, no child should grow up without a parent. I want you to promise that you won’t give up. That you’ll keep fighting to the last to come home.”

“I’m not giving up,” Clark responded, filled with a resolution that had been lacking for the last few days. Talking with his friend had been the right call. “Just like you made a pledge to that dream, I made a pledge to this family and the people of the earth. Nothing is going to get in the way of that.”

The two clinked their beers together with smiles, even as Lois rolled her eyes at the boys’ over-the-top declarations.

She was smiling as well.

******

The next day, at 9am Sydney time and 5pm Eastern US time, the Elden Lord would be recorded ordering breakfast at a family diner on the outskirts of the Australian city.

He was accompanied by two known consorts, the Goddess Ranni and Glynda, and a third unknown woman with one eye. Even in a world filled with Supers, the group's unique appearance prompted a few people to post about them on social media.

Batman's sophisticated tracking technology immediately flagged the images and delivered the notice to the Dark Knight.

Judging that the draconic alien would not be in any rush, Batman had a few heroes approach the area but maintain their distance. At the same time, the rest of the League, the Avengers and the Guild were alerted to a possible deployment request incoming.

Once they were ready, Superman was to be the point of contact.

Batman had argued against it, but the man of steel remained firm in his decision. This was to a diplomatic meeting first, and only as a last resort should it escalate to violence.

Bruce relented after Clark pointed out they had enough time to go in fully prepared.

While they waited for everyone to be in place, Superman finished his current assignment of delivering a batch of organ donations to a hospital.

Waiving off the hospital staff with a smile, Superman turned to fly to Australia to meet with the Elden Lord.

Before he got very far, his communication computer beeped at him. The pattern was for an emergency backup request.

Worried that something had gone wrong with the Elden Lord, Superman breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it was located in the US and thus unlikely connected to the Elden Lord.

After confirming with Batman that they still needed a few minutes to move so many heroes to the southern hemisphere, Superman decided he had enough time for a quick stop nearby before talking with Mikael.

So Superman set off towards Ohio, where the local PRT was asking for help dealing with a mutant moving eastward.

Author's Note:

Thus ends the second to last chapter of Emancipation.
More character exploration in this chapter, for both the Family and the heroes, than action but the next one will more than makeup for it. Melina is somewhat hard to write. She is such a mysterious character in Elden Ring. She clearly comes to care for the PC, but simultaneously, she maintains her distance. That being said, her relationship with Mikael, her exploration of her place in the Family, and her search for purpose is a good starting point I can build off of.

Superman, by contrast, was easy to write.

Some of my favourite comic storylines have been the ones that focus on the more mundane effects of a superhero/villain's life. Yes, they are over-the-top characters in brightly coloured costumes, but they also have feelings, fears, and hopes for the future.

Part of writing a good story, I think, is not forgetting that everyone, even the side characters, has their own character moments. (Though I will try not to get bogged down in them either.) Superman, the man who is at once an alien yet also the most human character, struggling with his impending mortality, is a powerful idea I couldn't ignore.

Comic fans will know what's coming since I have foreshadowed it so heavily, but I think I can still surprise you. So I will see you all next Friday for the last chapter of Volume 2, part 1: Emancipation.

EMANCIPATION VII

The last days, our death throes, the ultimate inferno
No hope for survival, this Doomsday is our final sight
Dark and grim, your fate will begin
In the fire and the pain, God will end on this Doomsday

Fate is a fickle fiend.

Those able to peer into its weave, few that they are, are well aware that it is not set in stone. It is not that prophecy detects the most likely outcome and then reveals it.

Instead, the utterance of a prophecy makes the results spoken the most likely outcome. People react to the 'knowledge' of the future either to attain or avoid it, making the result nearly inevitable. All predictions, no matter their origin or intent, are self-fulfilling in some small manner.

Mikael had existed in the dimension for millions of years, yet predictions continued to be fulfilled as prophets, clairvoyants, and the divine predicted.

Then the Blinding happened.

If fate was a tapestry woven from countless possible threads, then the Blinding was someone ripping enormous holes in the fabric.

Most blamed the Elden Lord's presence for the Blinding, which was correct, but they missed the root cause. It was his defences, not his presence, that caused the issue.

Defences that only came online when he reached his 'peak'.

Those who peered at the weave as a whole, who saw the many images of fate writ large, knew all Sight had failed with the Blinding. There would never be another valid prophecy.

Those threads which did not intersect with the Elden Lord or his Consorts, those who resided on the other side of the universe or in isolated communities, were touched by the ripples through which all things are connected.

Predictive modelling did not peer at the weave of fate.

It made predictions based on gathered data and projections. This made machines and beings who followed this process uniquely resilient against the ripples in the weave as they accepted it as more data.

It also made them blind to the holes as they could not account for unknown variables.

The Defences blinded all predictions for those it protected but did not protect the after-effects of their actions.

The Clairvoyant could not predict anyone in the Family, but it could categorize even

the likes of Galactus and Pheonix. It judged, even after everything the Family had set in motion, that Superman would still die. That other heroes would die in the conflict, as well.

All that changed was the final outcome.

When Batman told Clark he would win at the cost of his life, he was unaware that the future had already changed by the actions of The Family.

If he had asked the Clairvoyant on the morning of the 25th of October if they would win, it would have responded that victory was utterly impossible.

But he couldn't.

And so the heroes that gathered to fight that day were unaware they were fighting till their inevitable doom.

*****

Goldstar coughed another glob of blood into his fist as he tried to rise.

His missing leg and the bloody stump of its previous location, still spurting blood, stopped all attempts to escape.

The PRT hero was forced to sit there and watch, eyes blurring and feeling dizzy, as the mutant smashed Limelight through an apartment building. His shields cracked as he screamed, lime green outfit torn.

Limelight had a healing factor, a rather potent one, in fact, but the mutant did not give his fellow hero time to recover.

The thing's one good hand smashed the foundations of the building to smithereens, and the rest came crashing down on the hero, civilians and all.

Goldstar felt nauseous.

It could have been the blood loss.

It was more than likely because he just saw hundreds of people, men, women, and children fall to death in the rubble that crushed his friend.

This was the third building to collapse, not counting the major bridge that the thing had destroyed, which had alerted the Cleveland PRT to the terrorist act.

They had set out as quickly as possible, lucky that the whole team had been present thanks to some higher-up putting the team on alert for possible deployment. Goldstar, Limelight, Electro the robot, Ice, and Fyre had arrived at the collapsed bridge to find a Super tearing his way through those who had survived the collapse.

It was wrapped in green and covered by metal cables that wrapped it like some sort of futuristic straitjacket. It was bound so tightly that its right arm was held behind its back.

It wasn't even in the top 10 weird costumes Goldstar had seen.

Half the team had engaged the villain when he didn't respond to them, and the other half had set about trying to rescue the civilians.

The thing had torn through them.

Ice had been shattered into bloody pieces within the first thirty seconds.

Fyre had held on longer, staying farther away and blasting the thing with her flames. But nothing seemed to damage it as it ignored the fire to charge at her with speed none of them could follow.

She died in the first building collapse, pummeled to paste under its fists, the shockwave tumbling the building into a crater.

Electro had tried to lead the thing away from the city center, taking potshots at it and staying out of reach. The thing had jumped high enough to catch the robot in its unbound arm and crush the metal to pieces.

Only Goldstar's various tinker tech inventions, his flight ring and forcefield belt, and Limelight's sheer durability, had allowed them to last as long as they did.

It was all fruitless.

The Cleveland Protectorate, small as it was, had been decimated in five minutes.

Now Michael Jon Carter lay dying after watching his friend be brutally murdered. Cleveland remained undefended until the SOS was answered.

They had failed.

Darkness crept around Goldstar's vision.

Too weak, he could not see the Flash of red and blue that interrupted the mutant's rampage.

The last thought of the hero, Goldstar was of the end.

Of Doomsday.

****

Superman tackled the green-clad man and carried him skyward.

He had only a moment to take in the situation, but it had filled him with profound pain and sorrow. The collapsed buildings, the wails and screams of the innocent, and the bloody remains of the heroes all lit a fire in his chest.

But Superman couldn't lash out.

As much as he wanted to, as much as he desired to pummel the man who had destroyed so many lives and throw him into jail, he had to follow the proper procedure. Give the man a chance to surrender to the law.

If heroes did not follow the law, then nobody would.

Priority number one was to remove the threat to civilians.

So when Clark grabbed the green-clad behemoth, he intended to fly him out of the

city and into the state's less populated areas. Thanks to his speed, they left the city in a flash.

Less than three seconds after taking flight, the air was driven from his lungs as a mighty fist slammed into his back, forcing him from the sky.

They crashed into the ground in a cavalcade of grass, dirt, rock and asphalt. Tearing a long groove into the earth, the pair rested in a mall's parking lot.

Neither was hurt, though both were dirty.

Superman disentangled himself from the man, taking flight and hovering in the air as he tried to regain his bearings. The green-clad man stared up at the Kryptonian, his feature obscured by the green costume and metal cables. Clark could see patches of grey skin peaking out here and there.

Either a mutant or an alien, then.

Superman had succeeded in getting the man away from the city center, which was a plus, but this area was still too populated for his taste.

"Who are you?" He called out. "Why are you doing this?"

The man didn't answer.

Instead, it jumped at him.

The ground cratered under the thing's feet as it threw itself skyward at the Kryptonian. Its speed and force were fast enough that Clark could not dodge out of the way. In a reversal of earlier, the green-clad man tackled Superman out of the air.

As they hit the ground, Clark could roll away thanks to the opponent only having one arm. He rose to his feet and punched the man in the chest.

If he wasn't willing to talk now, he might talk in the ER.

The impact of Superman's fist on the man's chest tore the green cloth from his chest, revealing more craggy grey skin underneath.

The mutant did not even flinch.

Clark didn't have time to be surprised as the thing's one good arm lashed out and back-handed him through the mall.

While Superman had controlled his strength to a degree to not kill the man, that punch would have laid out most Brute 6s. The blow he received in return had been at least ten times that level.

Clark set his mouth into a frown even as he stood from the rubble, thanking his lucky stars that it was near closing time.

Still, this area was too populated.

"Superman requesting backup and evacuation west of New Philidelphia, Ohio," he said into his earpiece on an open channel, hoping any local heroes would be nearby. "We

have a Brute, at least 9. Green costume. One arm tied behind his back. Civilian removal is a priority. Send help."

That was all Clark had time for as his hearing picked up the screams of the locals.

Rather than chase after the Kryptonian, the mutant turned away from the lowering sun and headed eastward, destroying everything in his path.

Superman flew fast enough that he was able to grab a family about to be crushed by their collapsing house, but by then, the man had moved on to another structure.

Whoever this was, they were more intent on causing death and destruction than anything else.

His priority being saving lives above all else, Superman felt stifled.

With a massive chunk of heroes on the other side of the world, ready to face off against the Elden Lord, only some could arrive to help on time.

Nevertheless, Superman would do what it took to save lives and defeat the villain before it reached the major cities along the east coast.

That is what a hero did, after all.

*****

When Superman sent out his request for aid, people were listening.

Batman was the obvious one, of course, as he monitored a whole network as he tried to coordinate dozens of heroes in preparation for the coming battle.

He didn't have any footage of Superman's current location, but he was able to review Goldstar's headpiece footage.

Bruce Wayne was left with a choice.

He either sent aid or continued to focus on the upcoming confrontation with the Elden Lord and trusted Clark to handle it with local hero support.

In the end, though he is paranoid and concerned with the Dragon on their doorstep, Batman is also intelligent and decisive. He also knew his friend well enough that if Superman wanted help, he needed it.

Less than a minute after receiving the SOS, Batman alerted what heroes he could to head to Superman's location.

For a second, he hesitated but then got on the comms to call three particular women to their aid.

They could confront the Elden Lord later.

*****

Batman wasn't the only one listening to the open hero channel.

Police, PRT personnel, Medical and fire stations, and news outlets all heard Superman's call for help. While Cleaveland was still scrambling its own emergency services for their part of the disaster, other places sent their teams to provide what aid they could.

Local fire stations, police offices, and hospitals were well used to the dangers of living in a world of heroes and villains. While engaging the villains was left to the PRT and any heroes or vigilantes, these regular humans did their part to minimize the civilian impact in any way possible.

News crews, those nearby or with helicopters, dispatched their reporters to cover the incident.

The Protectorate had a few heroes in nearby cities, ready for a coming clash with the Elden Lord. They dispatched what they could afford without leaving their cities undefended.

Slowly but surely, the world was starting to focus on the clash of heroes and the unknown villain.

*****

"When do you want to spring this?" Glynda asked me under her voice.

"Once Robin finds Flash," I answered at a normal volume. "He is the biggest threat, and if things go south, I want him neutralized first."

We didn't really need to whisper, enclosed in a bubble of silence from a spell I had cast. A modification of the Hush spell from Dark Souls and the Unseen Form spell from Elden Ring had us in a dome that made us invisible and silent.

It wouldn't protect us from heat vision or other more esoteric searching abilities, but they weren't really looking for us.

They thought they knew where we were all ready.

"How's the food?" I asked Ranni.

"I cannot taste through my dolls," she answered haughtily. "Though it looks like the French Toast is mush and the omelet is slightly overdone. A subpar showing."

"We'll find somewhere else to eat after all this," I appeased her. I didn't want to get addicted to our cooking, so I was trying to find other places we could enjoy on this vacation.

You know, so long as we didn't sink Australia if we ended up fighting the Heroes.

Inside the dinner, four of Ranni's dolls were illusioned to look like our group. They were the bait in the trap.

I was hopeful that it wouldn't come to a fight, for Diana's sake if nothing else, but I also wanted to be negotiating from a position of strength.

Heroes are nosy creatures. They wanted to be assured that my group and I would not try and destroy the world or something equally stupid.

On the other hand, we wanted to not be hounded every time we stepped outside. Since we were not planning anything dastardly, it looked like we had room to talk.

However, I had no desire to suborn myself or The Family to anyone. Be they heroes or villains, countries or organizations, they would all want a piece of us.

We were too strong or valuable for them not to want to control or destroy us.

The fundamental goal here was to show ourselves to be a considerable threat that they couldn't engage us without paying a huge cost. At the same time, we couldn't scare them too hard, or they would go all out, cost be damned.

We had to be a neutral threat, not an active one.

So I had set a trap.

They didn't know that I knew how most of them operated. While my knowledge of comics and Worm shouldn't be followed blindly, I still had ways of verifying that knowledge.

And Bruce Wayne was still Batman, so I could count on old Batsy to do the most paranoid thing possible.

It didn't matter if he was more intelligent than me if I held more knowledge than him. At least for now.

I was going to outsmart his outsmarting.

"I have him," Robin told us through a pair of lips on the floor. "Three blocks to the east, in the alleyway to the left of the jewelry store. He is eating a box of donuts."

"Thanks," I said as the four of us moved in that direction. I kept us silent and invisible, though it was mostly for me. Both Ranni and Glynda could fly, from their spells and semblance, respectively, and Melina moved with the silent grace of a Black Knife Assassin. To say nothing of Tsunade. My wings were part magic, but if I wanted to fly, they still displaced air, so I didn't open them. "How many signatures?"

"I've found thirty-six within 50 kilometres, which are above civilian level. More are arriving every minute," Yoruichi spoke into my ear. She was in her cat form to hide better.

"Four more are powerless but have machines," the shadow clone of Tsunade chimed in.

If all went to plan, the heroes would never know that anyone but the four of us was

here. Almost everyone was present, though hidden away, in case things went south.

Priscilla was watching the pets on the Island since she was the least combative of The Family.

And we didn't want to kill people, at least not yet.

I had set Artoria off on a different mission with Diana, but if worst came to worst, I could have Raven bring them to us in a few minutes.

We arrived above the jewelry store, Didgeridiamond, and looked down to see Barry Allen, dressed as the Flash, polish off his last donut and start digging into a box of Tim Tams.

I knew speedsters had an extremely high metabolism, but seeing him pack so much food away so quickly was still impressive. He ate almost as much as Artoria.

Almost.

"The bounded field is set," Medea sent her voice to me by a spell. We kept telepathic communication to a low point, aware that some heroes could intercept or at least sense it, and we didn't want to blow Emma's cover. Her words indicated that the final piece was in place. "Should I activate it?"

With that news, the stage was set.

I had learned my lesson about how 'low' tech could still work on us, even with the Defences. Over the last few days, I had worked with Medea to devise a Bounded Field specifically designed to stop all electronic equipment from sending signals out of an area.

Thanks to Magic Talent and Medea's vast knowledge of spells, we had created it on the first day and spent the rest of the time turning it into a spell we could deploy in less than a minute of preparation.

"Let's not tip our hand just yet. That could spook them," I answered. "Any sign of the boy scout?"

"No," Yoruichi answered.

"Negative," Tsunade said.

"I have eyes on Supergirl, but I cannot see her cousin," Robin explained.

The 'shounen ninja trio', as I called them in my head, were incredibly useful for tasks like this.

I had expected Superman to be here, as the 'face' of the justice league and the most recognizable hero. His weakness to magic meant that we didn't need to fear him as much as some other heroes, but he was still a force to be acknowledged.

I was left to wait for him or spring the trap early. There were benefits to both.

"My Lord?" Melina asked. "Your orders?" The rest of the group present looked at me.

"Hmm," I thought for a moment before making a decision. "Let's go."

****

“Hello there,” the man said gently as he appeared from nowhere.

Barry sped himself up on instinct, giving him a moment to calm his surprise so he would drop his snack. It also gave him a moment to take stock of the situation.

The Elden Lord stood at the entrance to the alley. The three women supposed to be with him in the restaurant were arrayed behind him. Barry had never met any of them, but he had studied their files extensively.

Except for the one-eyed brunette.

She was new.

Ranni was a Goddess. One who had faced a conjunction of the Justice League and some top heroes by herself came out on top.

Glynda was an accomplished telekinetic, possibly the greatest in the world, if their speculation of her ability to manipulate things on the atomic level was correct. That was the only way she would have been able to repair all that damage unless she was a time manipulator.

The Elden Lord was a dragon the size of a continent, a world conquerer whose presence could drive people mad.

It would take a little bit for the other heroes to notice the change in the situation, and until then, the Flash was outnumbered.

Barry was sure he had been in worse situations before but had trouble thinking them up.

Thankfully, they didn’t seem hostile.

“Hello,” he answered politely as his perception returned to normal. Batman would notice and alert the other heroes if he kept them talking. “What can I help you with?”

“Do you mind if I try one of those?” The Elden Lord pointed to the almost empty box of Tim Tams in Barry’s hand. “I’ve never had them before, and I am a bit hungry since our breakfast was interrupted.”

Barry wordlessly passed the box of chocolate sweets to the man, who took one and popped it into his mouth.

“Mmmm,” he hummed as he ate before swallowing. “I don’t have much of a sweet tooth, but these are pretty good. You girls want one?” He asked the women behind him. They remained silent, eyes focused on Barry. “Suit yourselves. Anyway, where are my manners? I am Mikael, these are Glynda, Ranni, and Melina.”

“I’m the Flash,” Barry said politely. Usually, this would be when he would start mouthing off, but Superman had been clear that antagonizing the group was to be avoided unless given no other option.

Say what you will about Barry Allen, but he was a hero and had no desire to start a fight in a populated area if he could avoid it.

That and every second that ticked by increased his chance of backup arriving.

“I’ve heard of you,” Mikael said with a smile. “Central City, right? In the US? Makes me wonder what you are doing down here and interrupting my vacation. And with so many friends.”

A cold sweat rolled down Barry’s back.

They had hoped that, since Yoruichi and Robin hadn’t been present with the group, they would not be able to sense the heroes gathering. There had been some concern that the one-eyed woman, Melina, was the unknown psychic, so they had maintained their distance from the group and had the White Queen and Wiccan keep an eye on them.

They had reported no psychic activity.

“Sorry for that,” Barry said with a tense smile. “Didn’t mean to disturb you and all, just wanted to talk.”

“Well,” Mikael said, leaning against the entrance to the alley. “I’m right here. Talk.”

Superman was supposed to be the one to initiate this conversation, but Barry decided that beggars couldn’t be choosers. That and Batman hadn’t said anything.

“I just wanted to ask some questions, if you don’t mind.”

“Ask away.”

“First off, any plans for world domination? I hear it’s all the rage lately, and I wanted to know if you were getting on that bandwagon. I hear you have some experience with it,” Barry asked quickly with a tense smile.

“You don’t say?” Mikael asked rhetorically. “I can honestly say the only time I like to dominate is in the bedroom. Everything else is too much of a hassle, ya get me?”

“I understand,” Barry nodded quickly, happy that he wasn’t flying off the handle and a bit surprised about his openness. A quirk of his home culture? “Though I’ve also heard you’ve conquered worlds before. What changed?”

“We might be thinking of different things here,” Mikael tossed a look to Ranni, who puffed up her cheeks. It was such a human action and so unexpected that Barry stared at the blue woman in surprise. “I understand my wife unintentionally gave me a bad wrap. You’ll have to forgive her for it. She comes from a culture where bragging about one’s achievements is the norm. I thoroughly… chastised her for it.”

“Lord Husband,” the goddess said with a whine, her face a deep purple.

While his words concerned Barry, he didn’t like wife beaters at all, the flushed face of the goddess, and her smile, told him that it wasn’t the case here. It probably had more to do with ‘dominating in the bedroom’ than actual violence.

“Anyway,” Mikael continued. “I should clear up the misunderstanding.

When Ranni said I conquered worlds, she meant it in a more metaphorical sense than ruling them. Her world was in a civil war, and I helped settle it and restore peace. Another was cursed with an undead plague, and I stopped it. I have no desire to conquer anything. I have never ‘ruled’, nor do I desire to. I am just here on vacation. A pit stop on the road of life.”

Barry didn’t know if he could trust those words, but the fact that the Elden Lord was talking was a good sign.

“So, no intentions for the earth? No destroying it or enslaving humanity?”

“Why would I do that?” Mikeal asked rhetorically. “I like the earth. You have the internet. And pizza.” That was a good argument if the Flash ever heard one. “I am very big on freedom, so slavery is a no-go. Think of me as an intergalactic tourist. I’m here for the sights and food, and to immerse myself in the culture.”

“Who are you planning on meeting?” Barry asked. If they could find whoever it was that had drawn the Elden Lord to earth, then they could see about helping him finish his business and sending him on his way.

“A bit above your paygrade,” Mikael denied answering with a charming smile. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad, and I’ll be out of your hair soon enough. She’s just a bit fickle at the moment. Maybe in a year or two. Got a lot to-”

The Elden Lord cut himself off, turning his vision skyward, and his consorts followed his line of sight. Hidden by the building, Barry couldn’t see what had attracted his attention, but he hoped it was Superman.

He was close.

Supergirl flew down from on high, landing on the other side of the group from the Flash. She eyed the group warily but turned her eyes towards her fellow hero.

She looked worried.

“Batman’s been trying to reach you for a while.” She said. “We need to go. Cl-Superman needs help.”

“Where?” He asked, tension rising.

“Near the Maryland-Pennsylvania border,” she said.

That was all Barry needed to hear. He was off in a flash of red and yellow.

“Sorry, talktoyoulater,” he called back to the Elden Lord as he left.

The Elden Lord did not try and stop him.

*****

“Did… Did we just get blown off?” I asked rhetorically as I watched Supergirl fly away.

“It would seem so,” Ranni said.

“Pfffff,” Yoruichi laughed as she landed on my shoulder. “Your face! You should see your face!”

I didn’t need a mirror to know I looked pretty pissed. Not angry, just annoyed.

It was a pet peeve of mine that I hated being ignored or condescended to. I didn’t have to be the center of attention, and I liked being underestimated, but my ego was such that blowing me off completely was a sure way to get onto my shit list.

“Something pretty serious must be happening,” Glynda said as we were joined by the others.

“It better be Darkseid or something comparable, or I swear I am going to prank them so hard,” I muttered as I pulled out my phone. Chances were, anything that Superman needed help with would be all over the news. “Huh.”

“What?” Tsunade asked.

“Superman’s going to die,” I said plainly, my annoyance primarily forgotten. “Or at least, it looks like it.”

“How come?” Robin asked, looking over my shoulder at the live news coverage of a battle on the other side of the world.

“That’s Doomsday,” I said, pointing to a grey monster covered in white spikes. The footage came from a helicopter over the battle, but I could still make out the remains of green cloth on a few spikes. As we watched, a brutal punch to Superman’s face shot the Kryptonian across the field they were in. Doomsday looked relatively okay, but the man of tomorrow was covered in cuts and bruises. “In one of the most famous comics in my world, he and Superman end up killing each other. It’s possible that won’t happen here since it’s a crossover world, but from the looks of it, the Blue Scout isn’t doing too well, so he still might die.”

“Should we do something?” Glynda asked.

“Why would we?” I looked around the gathered group. A few of them looked worried, but Scathact looked eager to go. “Even if Superman dies, he comes back. Doomsday, too, so you can stop looking at me like that, you battle junkie. The thing’s primary ability to come back from the dead stronger than before. It takes a while, but it always happens. We can steal its corpse later and bring it to the Island for you to fight.”

“If you say so,” the celt said. Though her face looked blank, I could tell she was pouting. Adorable.

“We could use this as an olive branch,” Medea pointed out. “Help them out and get

some good publicity."

"We wouldn't be able to help too much," I waived her off, keeping my eyes on the footage. "I have an idea that might be able to kill him for good, but that's just a theory. The only one of us in the Family who could finish him off for sure would be Priscilla, and she is nowhere near strong or fast enough to fight him. Gae Bolg could kill him once, maybe, but he would come back anyway. Everything else that would kill him would result in us taking huge chunks out of the US, which wouldn't look good."

"Then let us return to our vacation," Ranni said, uncaring of the plight of the heroes of this world. She was like me, fiercely loving and dedicated to those close to her and entirely unsympathetic for others.

Our Family was not a group of heroes.

With a few exceptions.

"I'm going to keep watching," I said.

There was something about the footage that was bothering me. It was on the tip of my tongue, yet it continued to elude me even as I watched Flash arrive to save a group of civilians.

Was Doomsday growing new spikes?

*****

Superman was going to die.

Clark realized they had made a mistake after the first thirty minutes of fighting this grey monster.

This thing would kill him, not the Elden Lord.

A punch almost caved in Clark's face, but he managed to duck out of the way, the spikes on the thing's knuckles carving lines into the side of his head.

Clark returned the blow with one of his own. His unsuppressed punch hit the spiked chin of the beast with a thunderous smash. The air distorted from the force of the blow.

Clark really hoped Flash and the other heroes had evacuated the civilians. Not only was that a priority, but most heroes who tried to interfere in the fight were dispatched quickly by the monster. Most who took a blow from it did not get back up.

It was like fighting the Hulk again, only more bestial and bent on destruction.

It said not a word, only communicating in growls and roars but the sheer hatred and violence it gave off told him everything he needed to know.

A kick from a grey foot sent Clark tumbling end over end.

It was getting better. Better at fighting, better at countering, better at directing the

pace of the battle. It had torn its bound arm free after the first ten minutes and, since then, had not been on the back foot even once.

Clark was hurt.

He was tired and bruised in a way he never had been before. Even standing up again caused pain to flash through him, but stand up, he did.

He saw Myrddin try to suck up the monster into one of his portals, but the beast did not budge.

Early in the fight, Superman tried to fly it to more isolated areas. Spikes had grown on its feet to hold it in a place like some sort of demented pair of cleats. Then, when the ground gave way, the monster started to grow its 'shoes' even deeper into the ground, holding fast to the bedrock.

Now its legs looked completely armoured in white bone spikes. Smaller ones now covered almost every inch of grey skin, making any hit to it cause damage to the attacker.

This creature, whatever it was, was not only getting more innovative as the fight dragged on, it was getting stronger and more brutal. Adapting itself to new stimuli.

It was the ultimate killing machine.

So Superman was going to die, beaten to death by this monster. Clark had realized that a while ago.

He also realized he would still fight.

For the last few days, he had asked himself time and time again if he could really give his life.

If he could die a hero's death.

Yes, he could.

Clark had never felt himself to be above anyone, despite his powers. He felt himself to be as mortal as his fellow man. He hadn't known if he would flee in fear when the time came.

He knew that, despite his imminent demise, he would stand and fight.

Not because he was a hero.

Not because Superman was a symbol.

Not because he promises the world or Captain America.

But because he was protecting something more precious than his life.

The fight had started in Ohio, but the monster had continued to direct it eastward. Over the last thirty minutes, they had covered hundreds of miles and decimated vast swathes of the country. Washington was visible in the distance.

Now they stood less than 100 miles from Metropolis.

From his home.

From Lois and Jon.

So Superman stood once more, bloody and beaten, as Iron Man rained missiles down on the beast to no effect. Captain America took a blow on his shield, falling to the ground even as the vibranium prevented his death.

Superman saved his idol with a blast of his heat vision.

The red beams once carved bloody gouges in the monster. Those wounds had healed, and now all it did was push the bony white beast back slightly, great grooves cut into the ground from its armoured legs.

Supergirl tried to capitalize on its destabilized footing but was grabbed from the air and thrown into the distance, destroying a nearby mountain.

With a wordless cry of rage, Superman reengaged the monster. Early in the fight, he pulled his punches, afraid he would kill the man.

Now he went all out, his fists impacting the spiky skin of the monster with enough force to decimate cities. The nearby glass shattered from the after-effects of their blows.

Clark was trying to kill someone for the first time in his life.

And he was failing.

The creature responded in kind, blows raining down on Superman as it roared its wordless cry of rage and hate at all life.

Then the monster adapted once more.

Rather than take a blow with its rugged body, it dodged out of the way, weaving under Superman's arm and grabbing the Kryptonian.

Its spiked hands wrapped around his neck. Clark could survive without air, but the beast wasn't trying to strangle him. It was trying to tear his head from his shoulders.

He was saved when a blade cut the monster's outstretched arm below the elbow.

Clark collapsed, gasping through his soar throat as he watched Diana try to impale the beast. Even as he watched, its arms regrew, only now covered in bony plate likes its legs.

"I gotcha," a female voice told him as soft hands grabbed his shoulders and flew him away from the fight. "You've seen better days, Big Blue. Don't worry; Di's got this, and Ames will get you all healed up."

Glory Girl carried Superman away even as the X-men arrived to help Wonder Woman face the beast.

"You look like shit," Amelia said caustically as she laid her hands on Superman. She didn't even ask for his permission before healing him. Other heroes lay nearby. Some were already getting back on their feet. "You're lucky Batman let us out of our little asylum."

"Good to see you too," Clark rasped with a smile, well used to the maudlin woman since they had taken her down and tried to rehabilitate her. He was already feeling better.

“This better count as good behaviour,” she snarked. “The earlier I get out of that place, the better. If I have to sit through one more episode of Vicky’s fashion shows, I’ll re-kill her myself.”

“I’m sure it’s not too bad,” Superman’s flesh re-knit together, and his bruises healed at a speed visible to the naked eye.

“Easy for you to say,” Amelia said as she stood up and started to walk toward another patient. “You don’t have to live with her.”

“AMES!!!!” Glory Girl shouted in the distance.

Superman turned in time to see a grey form rocket passed him toward the undefended healer.

Maybe it was more intelligent than they gave it credit for, and it understood the importance of targeting the healer first.

Perhaps the thing was angry to see the pain it inflicted undone.

Either way, as Glory Girl flew towards her sister in a panic and Superman reacted just a smidge too late to block the beast, the alien bore down on the former Red Queen.

Had this been a week ago, Amelia Lavere would have died as a bloody past under the punch of Doomsday.

But this was not Amelia Lavere, the recovering villain.

This was Amy Dallon.

Unshackled.

With a clumsy duck, Panacea avoided the punch of the beast.

With an equally unpracticed move, she lashed out with a fist.

A fist backed by the force of a Kryptonian physique.

Locked in M/S confinement, what was a girl to do but tinker with the new aspect of her powers? Why not give herself the benefits of the bodies of the greatest heroes the world had ever seen? She had healed Kryptonians and other brutes enough times to know how they worked.

In its lunge, the beast’s legs had separated from the ground.

Amy’s punch lacked the full force of Superman due to her poor form and relatively short time absorbing sunlight, but it was still strong enough to send the grey monster flying.

“Woah,” Glory Girl exclaimed as she flew to a stop near her sister. “Ames! What was that?”

“I’ll explain later,” the Striker, now Brute, said seriously before turning to Superman. “We need to stop that thing as soon as possible.”

“What do you think we’ve been trying, toots,” Iron Man said, flying close to the group

even as he continued to try and blast the monster when the other heroes gave him a target. “Why do you never have a Thor when you need one? Or a Hulk?”

“We need to kill it now!” Amy insisted. “When I touched that thing, I looked at its insides. It is not wearing out. It is getting stronger and more deadly with every second that passes. Its healing factor is insane. Unless we can eradicate it in one blow, I need to get my hands on it for at least a few seconds.”

“Get ready then,” Superman said. “I’ll hold it in place for you.”

As the Kryptonian dived back into the fray, dodging Colossus carrying a limp Rogue to safety as Cyclops blasted the monster in the chest, he felt a spark of hope kindle in his chest.

They could do this.

They would win.

Even if it killed him.

“Hold him,” Clark shouted to Diana as both approached the monster together. Long years of teamwork meant no other words needed to be shared.

The monster’s chest was armoured now, though still spikey enough to hurt anyone who tried to punch it.

But Clark wasn’t trying to punch him.

Superman’s arms wrapped around the monster as if to tackle it away once more.

That wasn’t the goal, either.

“Argh,” Clark coughed up blood once more as the monster’s fists battered at his body from above.

He only needed to weather the blows for a few seconds before a golden lasso wrapped around those arms, holding them tight together.

The beast roared again, its wrapped arms straining against the rope of the gods. Clark and Diana held fast, unwilling to let the monster move even an inch.

“Here’s Vicky!” Glory Girl laughed as she dropped her sister behind the beast and dove to grab its legs just in case.

With all three heroes doing their part, Amy had enough time to lay her on the back of the monster.

She could see it all.

The rampant adaptation, the optimization for killing, and the Corona Pollentia connected to a Gemma working overtime to continue to adapt against her power.

A week ago, it would have won.

Now?

Amy shut down all its organs, cut all communication of the brain from the rest of the

body and separated its spine from its neck.

The monster went still, its head falling at its feet.

There was a moment of tense silence.

Then someone cheered.

Then they were all cheering.

Amy kept her hand on both the body and the head, ensuring it was dead.

And it was.

The last activity of the brain stopped under her watchful eye.

*****

The Clairvoyant could not predict, or even sense, anyone protected by the Defences.

Including Glory Girl.

Her contributions to the fight had been entirely outside its range of possibilities.

Unlike Amy.

The Clairvoyant could still account for her. And her new powers.

And, knowing that, it still concluded they were all doomed.

*****

“Run!” Amy shouted to the cheering heroes even as she grabbed her sister and pulled her away.

The body remained unmoving.

The head opened its eyes.

She had removed her hand in time to avoid the spike of bone that would have impaled it.

Even as some heroes watched in stunned stupefaction, some were already moving to destroy the head.

It was too late.

Bone erupted from the stump of a neck in a cruel parody of Amy’s real father’s power.

In less than a second, it formed itself into a new body.

Almost centaur in shape, its bulky form as ten feet tall. Bone armour covered its four arms and six legs. The only patch of grey skin remaining uncovered was the head and the red eyes that glaired its hatred to the world.

It roared its primal fury to the gathering of heroes who, rather than fight to win, had to fight to stay alive.

*****

“Thank you, princess,” the teller said with a smile.

“You know I can resist your food, Giannis,” Diana said with a smile as she paid for the food and passed it to Artoria. “How’s the family?”

“Good,” Artoria saw the tanned man smile at her friend. “’Dite is ready to pop any day now. We already have a room set up for the new little one. Painted it pink this time instead of green.”

“I hope to hear about it when I come by next time,” Diana said with a smile, even as she left a generous tip in the jar near the counter. “And Konstantinos? How’s he handling the fact he’s going to be a big brother?”

“Konstantinos?” The restaurant looked confused before shaking his head with a smile. “Do you mean Katerina? She is all excited about having a new little sister. Has all her dolls ready to go.”

“Oh,” Diana said, looking a bit poleaxed. “Sorry. My mistake.”

“No problem,” the greek man said as he shook his head fondly. “I know how busy you are. Between the embassy and being Wonder Woman, it is amazing that you remember my name at all.”

“Thank you for the food.”

Artoria frowned at her friend as they took their seats in a nearby booth. Even as she set the plates down, Diana simply stared at her meal without touching it.

“Diana?” Artoria asked gently.

“He added extra humus,” the heroine said.

“Hm?”

“This was my favourite restaurant when I was working at the embassy,” Diana explained as she stared at her plate in a daze. “A taste of home away from home. Giannis always adds extra humus because he knows I like it.”

“That is kind of him.”

“I’ve known him for years,” Diana continued. “I was invited to his wedding. I was there when his son said his first word.”

“You were close,” Artoria paused eating to grasp her lover’s hand.

“And now that son doesn’t exist,” the amazon seemed to sag into herself at her words. “This isn’t my city. It looks like it, but it is not. Every time I step off the Island, I am reminded of that. I am the imposter here. The fake Diana.”

“You are no fake,” Artoria responded strongly.

“The only reason we can be here is that the other version of me is on the other side of the world!” Diana insisted. “She might be fighting the rest of our Family right now, and what are we doing? You are here babysitting me!”

“You know that is untrue,” Artoria said softly. “I am not babysitting you. And Mikael will do all in his power to prevent a fight from starting.”

“It is true,” Diana replied. “Why else would you be here! He’s afraid I’ll join them! He still does not trust us!”

“He does trust us,” Artoria said calmly, not goaded by her friends’ inflammatory remarks. She was going through a lot. “The thought that you might side against the Family never entered his or my mind.”

“Then why are the two strongest fighters being sidelined?” Diana asked rhetorically.

“Because it shouldn’t become a fight,” Artoria reiterated. “Because should the worst happen and one does break out, I would hate for you to go through the pain of fighting your friends, different versions or not.”

Artoria had done that before. She had stood against her own knights on the battle of Camlann. A version of herself had set her knights against each other, and she had watched as the goddess Rhongomyniad as they tore each other apart on her orders. Though she had been an unfeeling machine at the time, the memory still haunted her today.

She did not wish that pain upon her friend.

“Artoria,” Diana said softly, calming down. She was aware of the King of Knights’ past, so she knew what her friend referred to.

“You say they don’t trust you?” The blonde continued. “I would ask you to put your trust in them. Trust them to come to an accord. Trust them to win without bloodshed should it come to a battle. Trust Mikael when he promised to support us. When you asked if he would support you if you joined this Justice League, did he not promise his aid? Having friends you do not wish to see harmed does not make you any less part of the Family. Trust us when we say that we want you to be happy.”

“I do trust you,” Diana said, their fingers intertwined. “And I am sorry. My discomfort at this new world is no reason to lash out.”

“No apology necessary,” Artoria said with a smile as she released her hand. “Now, I believe our food is getting cold.”

“Don’t stop on my account. Dig in.” Diana picked up her own fork to start her meal.

The next few minutes were passed in companionable conversation as Artoria asked more about what other favourite spots Diana had in the city she used to protect.

The Lancer finished her meal in record time, but the heroine was still picking at hers when alarms rang out throughout the city streets.

With barely a word, both women exited the small restaurant to see what was happening.

All around the street, people were hurrying away. Those that weren't fleeing were standing in place, faces glued to the screens of their phones.

The sirens continued to wail as Artoria approached a teenage boy holding his phone.

"Excuse me, lad." She asked politely but insistently. "What is this alarm? Has an Endbringer appeared?"

"Nah. This is a general alarm. Ya know, villains and shit." The young man looked up from his phone to see intense green eyes flecked with gold staring at him. "Woah! Too close! You scared me."

"Do you know where the villain is?" Artoria asked.

"Just outside the city," the boy stammered under her gaze. "You can watch it on the news."

"May we see your phone?" Artoria held out her hand, her words more of an order than a request. Grail Knowledge did not make her a technology expert, but she knew the basics.

"Never mind," Diana called out to her friend as she removed her device and looked up one of the local stations' websites. Another thing that remained the same, yet different. "I have it."

Artoria looked over her friends' shoulders to watch as images depicted various heroes fighting. For a moment, she feared that her Family had gotten into a fight after all, but then the camera zoomed in on a grey face atop a body covered in bone armour.

"Doomsday," Diana hissed.

"Truly?" Artoria asked as they watched. "He is different than what you described. More bestial."

"I'd recognize that face anywhere," Diana insisted. "You don't forget something that kills your friend."

"They are losing," Artoria calmly pointed out as the heroes on screen tried to attack the monster, rebuffed by an eruption of bony spikes projectiles.

"He's stronger than my world," Diana said as they watched Superman try and punch the beast. It was pushed back less than a foot and punched the man of steel with two of its arms. "Tougher too."

"Damn," the boy swore as he watched Wolverine be trampled under the bony legs of the monster. "Just when the Simurgh gets killed, this bastard shows up. We just can't win."

Diana went still.

“Artoria?” There was an odd lilt to her voice as she asked. “Do you think Mikael will truly support us?”

“He would,” she nodded without hesitation. “He promised us.”

“Even if we do something stupid?”

“He still would,” Artoria nodded again, though she felt the need to add something else this time. “Though he will tease us for it relentlessly.”

“I can live with that,” Diana said with a wild smile.

*****

The Clairvoyant could see everything in the multiverse once activated.

But it could not see a conversation on the Island two weeks after D-day.

It did not see how a man promised to do right by his Family. To make every world they lived in a paradise for them.

It’s amazing how one night, and one family conversation, can set dominoes into motion to change the world.

*****

They were going to lose, Clark realized with a bitter taste in his mouth.

That could be the blood.

Or stomach acid.

It was hard not to feel bitter.

Bruce had said Clark would be able to win if he was prepared to die.

No matter how you looked at it, there was no way to win. This wasn’t like the Elden Lord that evaded all blows by being dimensionally shifted.

The thing was right here!

They had thrown everything they had at it and more. They had killed it three times!

And it just. Kept. Coming. Back!

It was like a smaller Endbringer made of flesh and bone instead of silicone.

According to one of Myrrdin’s rare insights on the nature of powers, this thing’s ability was permanent adaptive regeneration. Everything they knew about power stemmed from Corona Pollentia, and Gemma said that once a brain died, that was it. No more powers.

This thing was adapting to its own death.

If it stayed dead for five seconds the first time, it did so for only two the second when

Shazam arrived to help. The third time it died, it came back right away.

Unless the Sorcerer Supreme appeared or they discovered some other way to banish this thing, they would all die, and the earth would follow them.

Superman steadied himself with a deep, pained breath. He was one of the only few heroes still standing. Panacea had been working non-stop to keep healing them after her powers no longer functioned on the beast, but there were simply too many injuries for her to heal everyone. Barry had been working overtime to pull civilians out of the way and retreat with any heroes too wounded to continue.

Even as the beast trampled Wolverine, it turned toward the gathered heroes and charged again as they stood between it and the country's capital.

He wasn't giving up.

He never would.

Even as Superman stood in front of the fallen forms of his friends and allies, he braced himself.

The beast grew more prominent in his vision as it approached like a stampeding horse.

Heat vision impacted its head, but it did no damage.

They had not been able to hurt it at all since its most recent revival.

Still, Superman stood his ground as his destined killer bore down on him.

Only to be intercepted by a spear of light.

The blast carved a chunk from the beast's body bigger than Superman and sent it tumbling to the side.

"That is quite enough out of you, beast," a regal voice said calmly.

Superman saw the knight approach a white steed. Clad in gleaming armour, she rode in front of them. Her blonde hair was done in a bun, adorned with a golden circlet. Her green eyes, flecked with gold, evaluated them for just a moment before turning back to look at the monster they had been fighting.

In her hands was the most beautiful weapon Clark had ever seen.

The Lance was threaded silver interwoven into and over itself in the shape of a spear. Gold light spilled from the grooves and where the woman gripped the handle. Clark could feel the Power of it thrum through the air.

The beast was not impressed.

Its wounds healed; it charged at the woman in a gallop, intent on tearing her down as it had many heroes before her.

She met the charge with one of her own. Her horse dashed forward at a speed few supers could match, and her Lance levelled at the monster.

Like a classic joust, the two figures narrowed the distance between each other.

Only one of them had experience jousting.

Ducking under the monster's swinging arms, the blonde's land impaled the beast's side. Half of its body exploded in another explosion of light and a cavalcade of gore.

The beast was not so easily slain, however. It healed as she rode past, and bony spikes erupted from its back. The horse nimbly dodged most of them, and the knight deflected the rest. One lucky shot impaled itself into her arm, passing through the metal to reach flesh.

Clark started to move to aid the knight when an arm held him fast.

Looking down, he saw Diana holding him in place.

"Don't worry," she said as she met his eyes. "Artoria can handle him for a bit. I'll join her in a moment. You guys rest up."

"Who are you?!" A familiar voice demanded, and Clark turned to see… Diana? She glared at the woman holding him still, her sword at hand.

"I'm you," the Diana near him said softly as she stepped away. "I'm a version of you. One further down the path and with a family to protect. One who will do you a favour so you might not see your friend die as I did."

She turned then and drew her own sword.

"Artoria!" The new Diana shouted, and the blonde knight disengaged from the monster and rushed to the Amazon's side. All her injuries had already healed, just like the monster's, and her horse vanished from under as well. Her spear remained in her hand, however, still glowing with power. "Protect them?"

"Of course," the blonde nodded imperiously. "I take it you have come to another foolish decision?"

"Unless you can unleash its full power here?" Diana asked, but Artoria shook her head.

"Not without destroying the city and a good portion of the state. But my other Noble Phantasm is still good. They shall come to no harm."

The beast took this opportunity to charge once more.

It was intercepted by a Lion of Light.

"Who are you?" Diana, the real Diana, asked again.

"They are consorts to the Elden Lord," Clark said while taking a deep breath. "Both of them."

"Really?" Glory Girl said as she returned from dropping off Amelia with the patients. She grabbed Myrddin, his legs crushed, and threw him over her shoulder. Even now, the Flash continued to act as a ferry, bringing injured heroes away and returning with fresh

ones. “Boss never said anything about having a Di of his own. He was holding out on me.”

“We are,” Other-Diana nodded, ignoring the new arrival. “Though consort is not the term I would use.”

“He returns,” Artoria interrupted. “Sir Ywain’s Lion has only delayed him. How do you wish to face him?” Myrddin gasped, possibly in pain.

“I think it is time I tried out a few of Mikael’s collection,” Other-Diana said with a smile. “It is a shame if all those weapons go rusty from disuse. Something is bound to be able to kill it.”

“Then I shall see to their safety. Good hunting.”

Diana, the new one, stepped in front of the group and glowed a dark red. A dozen women, made of red energy and see-through, stepped from her body.

As she did so, she pulled out a small box and upended its contents onto the ground.

From it poured a mountain of weapons of all sorts. Hammers and spears. Flails, morning stars, bows, and more swords than Clark had ever seen in his life. Dozens of weapons he could not even begin to name filled his vision.

Once armed, some with weapons too large for their frames, all the women stood beside the other Diana.

“My sisters!” She shouted to the group, and Clark realized they were all garbed in amazonian attire. The Wonder Woman beside him gasped. ‘Mother’? he heard her ask under her breath. “Today, we shall hold a hunt worthy of Artemis! Today, we hunt Doomsday!”

The amazons let out a soundless cheer and rushed at the approaching Doomsday.

“*In the sky, on land, on the sea…*” Artoria chanted, her eyes closed and her spear impaled into the ground. Power gathered around her as her chant continued.

“Shine Brilliantly, My Radiant Hall: ***Bright Ehangwen!”***

Light spread out around the group of injured and weary heroes. It coalesced into a brilliant silver platform under their feet, and they rose into the air. More light gathered in front of them, blocking them from the fight.

They were on a ship, Clark realized. An airship of some sort.

“While my hall pales before the walls of Camelot that Sir Galahad may conjure, it shall serve as a haven to you all.” The blonde knight, Artoria, stood up on the prow and looked at the imperiously. Like a king in her hall. “So long as you maintain the peace, abide by your heroic conduct, and Diana still calls you all friends, you shall be protected in this hall. You have my word as Artoria Pendragon.”

Myrddin fainted.

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For over five minutes, Diana battled Doomsday alone.

The semblance-created versions of her amazonian sisters worked with her like a well-oiled machine. They juggled this monster back and forth, never letting it rest or recuperate. With her mastery of Observation Haki kept the damage to a minimum, so she was rarely forced to replace one of her summonses when the monster pulled out a new trick and surprised her.

The acid spit had been a really nasty surprise.

They tried all the weapons they could. Mikael had spoken of a few crafted from the souls of the gods he had slain.

Undoubtedly one of those would lay this beast low. Unfortunately, Diana was unaware of which weapons were which and was thus forced to try them all.

Wonder Woman let go of Cursed Greatsword with a curse after carving Doomsday's back legs in twain. The monster healed from it instantly.

A few weapons, like the Cursed Greatsword, were powerful enough that Doomsday took a while to heal the first blow. But all the weapons they had found eventually ceased to be useful as it adapted to their power. IT would start to heal quicker and quicker and then receive no damage at all.

Philippus smashed a half-broken axe against Doomsday's back, causing the alien to roar in pain.

This time, Mala's weapon of choice, a Dragon Bone Fist, smashed its mouth shut.

Nubia pierced its chest with a dragonslayer's spear.

Hessia weaved between the beast's legs with flowing swords of magic and fire.

Arrows larger than Diana herself pierced Doomsday in place from Antiope's bow.

Over and over, they tore, crushed, cut and smashed the alien. Sometimes it took seconds to regenerate. Sometimes it did so instantly.

But it always healed.

And the pile of weapons was getting smaller.

Diana rushed back to grab another, but she stopped when she saw the man sitting on a massive hammer shaped like a golden drum.

"What's up?" Mikeal asked with a smile. "I see you've taken a liking to my collection. That's cool."

"Mikael," Diana sighed with a smile. "I take it the others are here as well?"

"They're around," he nodded. "Before we did anything else, I just wanted to ask you what the plan was? You know, so I wouldn't mess it up by barging in? Although, since we

are all over the news of the world, I think it might be too late for that."

"Plan?" Diana asked, feeling a bit embarrassed at his gentle reprimand.

"You can't tell me it was just to hit it until it dies?" He sounded so confused that Diana couldn't help but flush in embarrassment. While it was a bit more complicated than that, that was her plan in a nutshell. "What about Priscilla? You had to have stopped by the Island to get my stuff. You could have asked her for help. She's his perfect counter."

"No!" Diana denied the suggestion emphatically. "She is not strong, fast, or experienced enough that I would feel comfortable about having her face Doomsday. Just because she is a Dragon of Death does not mean she can kill everything she wishes."

"I agree," Mikael nodded, accepting her judgment call. "So how are you going to kill it? I'll let you in on a little secret. It seems to have the power of Crawler, one of the Slaughter House 9 I sent you after."

"That would explain its quick adaptation," Diana nodded, remembering his advice on the subject. "How should I slay him? Doomsday returns from the dead, and Crawler heals from anything that doesn't kill him."

"You should vaporize him completely down to the last atom. Your Breath wouldn't work, but Artoria's would if she got a direct hit. Or you could carry him out to sea and let her use Rhongomyniad. We could deal with the tsunami afterwards." The first idea was novel, not one she had considered due to the relative newness of their dragon forms. The second idea was one Diana already had, though one she was hesitant to use. Mikael must have sensed that hesitation because he asked. "What's wrong?"

"If I wish to be the one to slay the beast?" Diana asked, staring into his slit pupil. "Do you have a method for that?"

"Why?" He asked plainly, not denying that he did.

"Because we could never permanently kill the Doomsday of my world," Diana stated. "Because I wish to end a threat to the Family and this world with my own hands. Because I wish to never sit on the sidelines again while those I care about fight and die, and I am helpless to do anything!"

Mikael stared at her for a moment, even as she felt one of her summonses be destroyed.

"Ok," he nodded.

"Ok?" She asked at his simple response.

"Ok," he nodded again, this time with a smile. "I told you, didn't I? I'd support you all, no matter what. As you all did for me, I will for you. If you want to kill something, I'll gladly help. Though this one is easy. I've been thinking about how to do it since I first saw Doomsday on the news."

He waved his hands, and a blade sank between them.

It was a straight sword, simple in design, unlike most of his other weapons. If one looked closely, one could see its blade was made of stone, but it glistened like metal. Golden runes, faint to all but the most discerning, flickered in and out of existence along its blade.

There was a weight to the blade despite its relatively small size.

This was a weapon with a history, with power.

Forged from the body of an Elden Lord and the Elden Rune, this sword had slain a God.

“The stone scales of the Dragonlord lightly twist time,” Mikael explained. “That’s what makes it a Godslaying Blade. Any wound this inflicts will never heal. But Doomsday can still just cut out the damaged part and regrow it. Then he’ll be wary. You only have one shot at this.”

“One shot is all I need,” Diana said as she pulled the blade from the earth.

Another one of her Amazons disappeared.

That was fine.

Diana returned to where her last three summons were still engaging with Doomsday.

Her Observation Haki allowed her to dodge the glob of acid spit.

Her Armament Haki deflected a bone spike shot at her.

The summoned form of her mother, Hippolyta, glowing red with the power of her semblance, blocked Doomsday’s fists with a shield bash that released a lion’s roar.

Diana smiled to herself as she threw herself over the beast.

Even as she fought alone, her Family was still with her.

She plunged her husband’s sword between Doomsday’s brows and out through the back of his skull.

The alien stilled and, with an earth-shaking rumble, its massive form toppled.

Diana rode the fall to the ground, her hand grasping the Godslaying Blade in place. She did not take it out for fear the monster would revive.

As she stood atop the body of her foe, she felt a hand clasp her shoulders warmly.

“Good job,” Mikael said with a smile. “Knew you could do it. Never doubted you for a moment. Of course, you made a mess, but nobody is perfect.”

Diana rolled her eyes fondly at Mikael’s spew of bullshit and shut him up the only way she knew how.

With her lips.

The heroes saw an older Wonder Woman kissing the Elden Lord atop the hulking body of Doomsday as they descended to the ground in King Arthur’s flying hall.

As they landed, the hall shimmered and disappeared, and the weary heroes watched Artoria approach her husband and friend.

“So glad you all could make it,” Mikael said to them with a smile as he separated from Wonder Woman. He took a seat upon one of the spikes of the monster, his eyes lingering on the Flash and a battered Supergirl. Eight more ‘consorts’ emerged from the corpse’s shadow and faced the heroes. “I think we were rudely interrupted back there, but no harm, no foul. We can start over. So, why are you all ruining my vacation?”

Jimmy Olsen, a reporter for the Daily Planet, would later win a Pulitzer Prize for his photograph of that moment.

On one side, the battered and beaten forms of the heroes everyone was familiar with.

On the other stood ten women framed by the sun setting behind them. Atop the monstrous body of Doomsday, as if seated upon a throne and not a corpse, sat the Elden Lord.

Smiling down at everyone like he was having the time of his life.

Author's Note:

Betcha didn't see that coming! Did ya?

Doomsday with Crawler's powers.

I gave myself nightmares with that combo since they fit so well. The exact 'hows' and 'whys' will be explored later, but it turned out pretty well. The fight scene was four pages longer, but I cut a massive chunk because I was being gratuitous at that point.

I wrote this chapter in one sitting. For 12 hours, I was in the zone. It was so much fun. The rest of the week was spent on editing.

Diana's part in this is something I feel not many comic authors tackle. How do you cope if you are transported to a world (or different time) that looks almost exactly the same as your home? I would run into the Uncanny Valley every second, and I'd flip out, I think. Part of this fic is exploring a few of these ideas. It is one of the reasons I wanted to write in a comic world. To explore a few themes that aren't really handled.

How do you react to a version of yourself sleeping with the enemy?

Next week I have plans for an Interlude, an interlewd (as there has been too little of that), and then we move on to part 2 of volume 2.

See you all next time.

CLARIFICATION AFTER EMANCIPATION VII

The last chapter was much more divisive than I thought it would be. Some have said it is their favourite chapter yet, and others find it to be the tipping point for the fic. Now is an excellent time to clarify a few points.

I won't be spoiling anything or saying, 'this is how it is supposed to be read'. A reader can take something from a work that wasn't the creator's intent, which is still an accurate reading. Death of the author and all that jazz. This is just my interpretation of the characters.

Before anything else, thank you to everyone for reading my work.

Those of you who comment or read the comments know that I 'like' almost every single one, even if they disparage my work. That is because even negative comments stem from a place of engagement. You took the effort to respond, to engage with me, and I am thankful for that. (Though I do prefer happy ones since, as a creator, I like when my readers enjoy my work.)

First, for those who don't like how I've written the story or the characters, that is a valid opinion. If a specific character ruins your enjoyment of the fic, there is nothing wrong with dropping it. I would love to delve into the Wheel of Time series, but I can't stand a few of the protagonists and, thus, have been stymied in my attempts. If you have gotten this far into the story and decided that it isn't for you, then all I can do is thank you for giving my work more than its fair chance.

Some fanfiction is just not for everyone, and that is okay.

Secondly, for those questioning what could kill Doomsday, it is more limited than you think. I was going through all the weapons in DS 1, 2, or 3, and Elden Ring, and I only came away with a few choices.

Priscilla's Lifehunt Scyth would work, but that is fashioned from her soul, and the fluffy dragon is still alive, so Mikeal doesn't have it. Same for her dagger, which is made out of her tail. Maliketh's Black Blade doesn't have the rune of death anymore, so it wouldn't work either. For all that, there are some really cool weapons in Fromsoft games. They only have a few that deal damage that can't be healed. To kill Doomsday permanently (especially this one who has adapted to its own death), you either need to vaporize him entirely or do something that deals conceptual damage, IE, King Hassan.

The Godslaying Blade, for those who have played the game, is any weapon that has

been upgraded to +25 (Regular Weapons) or +10 (Special Weapons). These are the pinnacle of Hewg's craft, and to reach it, you either need an Ancient Dragon Smithing Stone or a Somber Ancient Dragon Smithing Stone, respectively. Both of these items have the same description:

The Ancient Dragonlord's seat is said to lie beyond time. This stone lightly twists time, allowing the creation of a weapon capable of slaying a god.

I, the author, had trouble finding things that would kill Doomsday without sinking the eastern seaboard (Rhongo, Going full dragon, Planet busting strength, etc.) Remember, it is not the lack of power that stymies most heroes. Superman is stronger than 99% of all his villains. What stops the heroes is the concern for collateral damage. (Unlike what modern movies would have you believe.) Iron Man can rain localized missiles but can't use a nuke. (Even Doomsday would probably be vaporized by some of the bombs we have today if they were dropped on him point blank.)

Diana made it look easy because she was lucky to have the right tool. A tool that was only available after Mikael had spent the last half hour watching the fight, and even he stated he wasn't sure it would work if she didn't kill him right away with it. Doomsday could still have adapted to the Godslaying Blade.

She had one chance, and that one chance worked.

Thirdly, for those hoping for Mikael to be a hero or a villain, I am sorry that that is just not his character. There is an underlying assumption regarding superhero fanfics that the MC needs to be a hero or a villain. That generally works because why else would you write fanfiction in those worlds if the characters don't engage with the cast. I am trying something different for RR.

Yes, Mikael will engage in heroic acts. Look at what happened with Rhino in this most recent chapter. But that is not his goal.

If you define being a good person as going out of your way to help people, then Mikael is not a good person. Neither is most of humanity. We, as ordinary people, will help each other if it doesn't severely inconvenience us.

That is what makes heroes like Superman or Captain America so engaging. They are symbols of good. Paragons to which some may aspire. I like heroes.

Mikael is not a hero.

I wrote before: Mikael would be in a different position if he had gotten to this crossover world at other times. He never goes to the cell? He probably becomes a hero. He gets to this world after leaving the cell but before meeting Melina? He would have been a loner, never really connecting with anyone. He arrives after Melina dies but before

connecting with the women of the Island? He becomes a villain/anti-hero.

I like protagonists that don't have a set destination. They can grow in a lot of directions.

Mikael, in this case, has stated his goal multiple times.

It is to build a sustainable life and relationship with the women around him.

He is millions of years old and has gone through a lot. One of the themes I have touched on is the nature of Immortality. Whether it is the hollowing of the undead in dark souls, Ranni's lonely quest, or Melina's search for purpose, they all struggle with the problems that come with a long life.

As I stated early on in this fic, I want to explore some aspects of the Waifu Catalogue that are largely untouched.

What do you do when you and your 'waifus' are going to live longer than most universes? How does a person react to that? How do they build a family?

Take the Doomsday V. Superman situation in the most recent chapter, for example.

If you are going to live infinitely long and visit an infinite number of universes, in every one of those with a Doomsday and Superman, do you rescue him every time?

Diana and Artoria, heroes to their core, would argue yes. And so they do.

Tsunade, Robin, Yoruichi, Glynda, Scathach and Raven would agree with them on certain conditions. (Wanting a good fight, removing a threat, medical curiosity, trolling, etc…)

Medea, Ranni, Emma, Melina, and Priscilla would probably ignore the situation so long as it didn't affect them or those close to them. Mikael falls more in line with this group.

I have rambled on for a bit too long, but I needed to get my thoughts out. I will leave this final thought.

I am writing RR, my first full story and fanfic, for 3 reasons. A) to tell a story through the lens of unexplored aspects of the Waifu Catalogue. B) To get better at characterization. And C) Because I enjoy writing it and want to read it when I finish.

So long as those aspects remain true, I will keep writing. So long as even 1 person tells me they enjoy my work, I will keep posting as well. If you don't enjoy my work, that is fine. I hope you find fics that you do enjoy. There are many more talented writers out there than I am. If you like my work, I hope you will continue supporting me.

We aren't even close to done yet.

On that subject, the next release will be an Interlude and an Interlewd. They are going to be relatively short. (Looks at how my word count has grown and cries) To counteract this 'short'ness, I will be posting another Question Qorner.

Feel free to ask me anything, but please be aware I will not reveal any spoilers. My inspiration, questions about my choices, clarifications on some subjects, or anything else you can think of that isn't a spoiler is fair game.

INTERLUDE:
D*E L/KE #E MUS-

Here comes the man with the look in his eye
Fed on nothing but full of pride
Look at them go, look at them kick
Makes you wonder how the other half live
Devil inside
The devil inside
Every single one of us
The devil inside

Through billions of eyes, he watched.

He watched The Ulitmate be unleashed upon the ‘heroes’ of the world.

He watched the Kryptonian meet it and found him lacking. A symbol of hope destined to die and become a symbol of despair.

More and more heroes arrived. Most had been shifted to the other side of the planet and could not arrive in time to impact the fight.

As planned.

This was not genocide. Not yet.

This was a reminder.

A reminder that hope was fleeting.

Heroes were still needed, of course.

Despair was only potent in contrast to a once great hope.

He controlled it all. The rise. The fall.

The leash was yet loose so they may strangle themselves.

It was soon time to pull tight.

Even as The Ultimate died to one of the infected’s hands, he did not fret.

Even when it died twice more, he merely smiled as his ‘gift’ proved its worth.

He watched when two of the interlopers arrived.

When The Ultimate was felled by them, he felt no regret. Whether it would rise again or not was immaterial. The beast was a blunt instrument. Powerful, but far from his most useful tool.

It had done its job.

Of more interest was this group.

This Elden Lord.

Yes.

He could work would this.

Through billions of eyes, he watched. A plan coming together.

******

Through his daughters' eyes, he watched the world buckle and shift.

Only five days left.

Even two months ago, this much oversight would have been impossible.

Now, he watched the heroes of the world be laid low by the lizard and its pathetic brood.

He wondered what dragon soul tasted like?

In five days, he would find out.

He laughed upon his throne of skulls.

His rumbling mirth at the impending pain and misery of countless should have sent anyone present running in fear.

All those present were too busy screaming to concern themselves as he watched a plan come together.

******

It watched the cosmos fly by.

It travelled upon fire and flame and life.

Searching.

Ever searching.

For the briefest of moments, in the flash of an instant, it had felt Life.

It had returned to the Rest, not the Room, to meet Life.

To become one with Life.

It had learned so much recently.

Ambition. Anger. Jealousy. Joy. Lust. Love.

Emotions.

Emotions that tinged White to Black and back again.

Upon the demise of its host/teacher/body, it searched for another so it could experience more. All emotions, in all its shades.

Then it would return to the Rest and share emotions with Life.

But now Life was gone.

Gone, and it couldn't find Life.

It searched and searched and searched and searched.

It watched the planets burn as it passed, searching for a lost Life.

******

She watched people die with a smile.

Even as the newscasters got increasingly desperate, as the heroes failed to stop the beast and fell one by one, she still smiled.

She watched men and women she knew, admired and liked fall under the might of the alien.

Even as they called for her family, begging for reinforcements from anywhere, calling for any help they could get, she smiled.

She watched the Enemy's plan play out, helpless to do anything but watch and hope. And smile.

Her smile widened when two of the Elden Lord's consorts appeared. Her prodigious mind, one of the best in the world, turned to what that meant.

She giggled when Myrrdin fainted. The knowledge of King Arthur being female was too much for him. It also had implications for her.

She outright laughed, tears of joy streaming from her eyes as the Elden Lord appeared and the alien was laid low. This was what she had been waiting for.

Turning to six beds in the room, she spoke to the one set aside from the other five.

"We did it, Uncle," she said, still smiling and laughing as she talked to the man on the bed. She couldn't see his metallic mask or the face under it. It wouldn't matter if she could. He could not have answered her anyway, trapped as he was in suspended animation like the rest. "We've won."

Turning to the other five beds in the room, their own occupants as unmoved and unmovable as the first, she smiled still. Her parents lay side by side, her biological uncle to her mother's right. Her other uncle needed a much sturdier frame and almost blocked the view of the last, much smaller bed.

"Soon, we can be a family again, and you can grow up properly, big brother." Though she called the boy on end her older brother, he looked much younger than her pre-teen form.

She turned back to the screen with a smile.

She watched the heroes meet the Elden Lord as she hatched a plan to bring the dragon to her.

******

People watched the news with bated breath.

Humanity was gripped by the image of a man sitting upon a towering corpse of grey and white bone like a throne.

Some hatched plans, using their knowledge of the situation to gain the most significant advantages.

Others, sensing a shift in the wind, decided that discretion was the better part of valour. They could scheme once the coast was clear, or they knew more about the powerful faction that had landed on earth.

All these watchers, all these planners, were unaware.

Unaware that they were big fish in a small pond under the eyes of a shark.

Death sipped her drink with a smile.

She could help him no more. It was up to him.

You could lead a dragon to earth, but you couldn't make it reach Tier 11.

She would meet with him soon, but that was a small matter. Though she could no longer see or predict Mikael and his Family, she held complete confidence she had made the right choice after watching him all this time.

All the worry she had once felt was long gone.

Now she was just curious.

Curious about what opportunities she had set up for him, he would use.

Curious to see if he could surprise her once more.

Curious if she would finally be free.

Death watched, but she didn't plan.

Her plan had already succeeded.

It was all up to Mikael now.

Author's Note:

I separate Interludes, Side Stories and Omakes, as I am sure some of you are aware. Omakes are non-canon, light-hearted, and a chance for me to write something foolish. Side Stories are canon but are not absolutely necessary to read. They help flesh out the world, but one can read the whole story without them and still get the complete picture.
Interludes are canon and are integral to the entire plot of the story. This one is short, heavy on foreshadowing, and incredibly vague. It is half of what I wanted to write, but I have been highly judicious with my scissors. I have rewritten it at least three times and am only partly happy with the result.

To make up for the brief update, I have a side story coming out soon. I am just doing a bit more editing, but you can look forward to it.

SIDE STORY IV:
WARM BLUEBERRY PIE (ADULT)

I've never known a girl like you before
Now, just like in a song from days of yore
Here you come a-knocking, knocking on my door
And I've never met a girl like you before

"Oh, Ranni~," I singsonged as I found the four-armed blueberry reading in one of the smaller sitting rooms. She was sitting alone on a long couch, her legs sprawled out. It was the most relaxed I had ever seen her. She looked up at me as I spoke, and it told of our long time together that she looked wary at my cheerful voice. "There you are, dear. I was looking for you."

Her caution wouldn't help her.

"My Lord?" She asked warily as she set her book down. "Thy needed me?"

"Nothing too bad," I said gently, the cheer still in my voice as I sat on the couch. Lifting her legs, I slid myself under them and pulled them onto my lap. I started to gently massage her calves. "Just a quick question, is all."

"My Lord?" She asked again, looking in surprise at my action. Her face flushed a deep azure, and her lower hands were shyly twiddling their fingers. She was incredibly easy to read when she was not inhabiting a doll.

It was a unanimous decision of the Family to not tell her how cute she was.

"See," I continued to massage her legs, Sticky Fingers giving me insight on where to press my fingers *just* right. "I just wanted to know more about your interactions with the heroes of this world. You know, when you were acting as my 'herald'."

"Wha- What would thee like to know?" Her breath was getting heavier, and her eyelids drooped. Her upper hands were now gripping at the fabric of the couch tightly.

"What happened?" I asked, pretending to focus on the massage. Realistically, I barely had to do anything. It had been only a month or so since she had gained a body that could feel and was incredibly easy to stimulate.

"As I told you, they though- They thought thee to be an agent of chaos, my Lord." She was panting now, her eyes closed and her skin a deep purple. "They mistook me for a 'Lord of Order', similar to one of- one of them. They sought to stop thy advance. I- I could not allow such an act. We battled."

"Yep, yep," I said casually. I pressed into a rather sensitive spot on her thighs. She moaned. Instantly her hands, all four of them, rose to cover her mouth, and her eyes

opened to stare at me in embarrassment. I pretended to not have heard or seen anything. “Before that, though. When you were talking. What, exactly, did you tell them about me?”

“I was thi- thine herald, thy guiding moonlight,” she squeaked between her hands. “I acted in such a capacity to the best of my abilities, though t’was the first time I had been in such a position. My fam- family employed heralds, and I sought to imitate the best of them.”

“How so?” I asked gently, pausing in my massage.

“I extolled thy virtues, of course.” She looked at me with wide, begging eyes, her body completely flushed and shivering. Did she think this was a reward for good behaviour or something? Her face was practically screaming, ‘praise me, praise me’. “Thy kind nature and thine unwavering tyranny.” My eye twitched. “Thy benevolence to those thee embrace and thy ruthlessness to thine foes. I spoke of thy triumphs. Thy rise to power from humble beginnings to laying low all who opposed thee. I spoke of thy might, of how thy conquered worlds and gods who opposed thee. After doing my duty as herald, I extolled them to petition thine aid as I know thee are fond of the just. T’was then they decided to engage in their futile attempt to halt thine path.”

I wanted to facepalm so bad right now.

This was what happened when you released someone with medieval sensibilities onto the modern world. It wasn’t even something Grail Knowledge could fix since it was a simple difference in priorities. She thought all she said was compliments, something to be admired in a strong and firm ruler. She was unable to think of a world where strength wasn’t something to be desired. Where you did not live with the ever-present threat of violence.

Pacifism? What’s that? Can you eat it?

“Did you mention anything about ‘consorts’ or something like it?” I asked instead of groaning at the simple mistake that had led to such a colossal misunderstanding. No wonder the heroes were so wary of me.

“Possibly,” Ranni said with a head tilt, her flush receding slightly after I stopped my magic fingers. “I mentioned something to that effect to the Diana lookalike. If they were to be our enemies, then bringing one to the Island for questioning and investigation made sense. Medea would be interested in the phenomenon of multidimensional copies, though I knew not that was what she was at the time. I know thee claimed to not want more consorts, but I also know it is a common fantasy for men to want to lay with twins.”

Right, not only had she claimed I was a world-conquering tyrant but that I was a kidnapping rapist.

I was surprised heroes didn’t try and kill me on sight.

Then again, the idea of a threesome with Wonder Woman and another Wonder Woman was incredibly hot. You know, if it wasn't for the implied rape.

I would have to channel my arousal at that idea into Ranni's punishment.

"Eeep," she squeaked as I pulled her onto my lap. My erection pressed into her, and I kissed her before she could say anything. It was clear she had no experience by the way she froze.

"I appreciate the effort," I said as I pulled away. Ranni's flush had redoubled once more. "I really do. But you have caused me a bit of a headache, so you must be punished." I said with a grin.

"My Lord?" She asked in a breathless daze.

"Don't worry, you'll enjoy it as much as me," I assured her. For some reason, she didn't seem reassured by my words. Weird. "Well, almost as much as me."

In one fluid motion, I lifted the blueberry goddess and laid her across my lap. Grabbing her voluminous cloak, I tossed it away, leaving her in a thick dress.

"Eeep," she squeaked once more. "My Lor-"

Smack!

Sticky Fingers did not give me a complete encyclopedic knowledge of someone's fetishes or a 'how-to' guide on how to please them. All it did was make their body language concerning sex and arousal clear. How to apply that knowledge became incredibly instinctual.

When I first spanked Ranni, I had intended to give her a few light swats and then proceed to hold her close and make sweet, sweet love to her since this was her first time. Like Artoria, more wild stuff could be tried later once Ranni was more comfortable.

The full-body shudder that passed through the goddess after only the first spank told me I might have accidentally hit a gold mine on accident.

Smack!

"Oooh!" She moaned beneath me at the second hit. I wasn't even trying to hurt her or even arouse her.

Smack!

She shuddered again, a low keening noise escaping her lips.

I blinked at her in surprise.

I didn't need Sticky Fingers to know she was getting off on this, but I was curious about where that pleasure was coming from. Was it the pain? The dominance? The loss of control? Was she really into butt stuff? So many questions. I would need to work hard to find out the truth.

Smack!

Alas, a curious man's work was never done.

Smack!

Truly, I lived the hardest (ha!) of lives. But it was my cross to bear.

Smack!

"MMMMMMmmmmmmnnnnnn!"

For science.

In between swats, I cast a minor crystal sorcery on my fingers and cut the straps of her dress. Then I tore the remains from her body, leaving her nude on my lap.

The way the pale blue ass lay there, inviting further punishment and her thighs glistened with arousal, told me she wanted more.

Smack!

Who was I to stop her?

Smack!

The inviting jiggle of ass flesh, the way it wobbled and flushed as it met my palm, and the way her toes curled and thighs clenched together furthered my desire to play with her even further.

Smack!

Smack!

Smack!

I watched her writhe and shudder under my hand, my dick rock hard in my pants from the image and all the movement. She panted and gasped, unable to form words as both pairs of cheeks darkened. One of her hands held a knuckle in her mouth, biting down to keep her 'silence', while the other three flailed and grasped at anything they could reach.

Smack!

As I spanked her, I tried other things. I held her down, lightly pinched, prodded, petted and caressed. I tried a little of everything short of penetration, trying to find her actual kinks.

Knowing your partner's likes and dislikes is paramount to a healthy sexual relationship.

Smack!

I pinched a dark blue nipple between my fingers, and she went wild. Spasming, thrashing, and bucking her hips as her biggest orgasm yet. I held her, no longer spanking her as she bucked and buckled.

That confirmed my idea.

She wasn't a masochist. Well, she was, but that was only a part of it. Pain, in the

proper context, set her off because her body wasn't used to it. But so did all my other touches, no matter how harsh or gentle.

She craved sensation. Stimulation.

She was so sensitive to everything I suspected she would get off on literally anything I did to her that physically stimulated her body.

What a wonderful woman.

I set her on the couch and stood, removing my clothes in a hurry. I was so horny now; my erection could hammer in a nail.

"Wha-" She gasped, refocusing slightly as I let her go. Four wobbly arms propped her up, and she looked at me with glazed eyes. "Husband? 'hat was 'at. Why dids't thou sto-" Her words slurred, but she got them under control only to freeze as she took in my naked form and position.

I *loomed* over her.

I didn't know her exact height, but I was pretty tall, so I towered over her by at least a foot and a half. Her head barely reached my chest when we stood side by side. Laying half sprawled across the couch, the shadow I cast covered her entirely.

She looked up at me with wide eyes. There was a hint of fear in her eyes and a lot of lust.

"Kyaa~" Testing out another theory of mine, I grabbed her by the waist and lifted her into the air, so we were at eye level. Bodily handling her like a living doll, I sat back on the couch.

In one fluid motion, I was in her.

"OOOOOOHHHHHHHH!" She screamed, her arms grasping mine futily even as she orgasmed around my cock. She had been more than aroused enough that she hadn't felt any pain from the intrusion.

I clenched my teeth, holding her still as her warm inner walls undulated along my shaft. She was tight, incredibly so. I didn't have the biggest dick in the world, but I was more than the average, and she was tiny. As it was, I think it was only the magic of the Catalogue that allowed me to insert my entire length into her wet core.

After a few seconds, her thrashing stopped, and she calmed down, panting for breath.

Then I lifted her up.

And down.

"MMMMMMNNNNN!" She set off again. I didn't stop. I had girlfriends in the past who had been sensitive, but she took it to a whole 'nother level.

Lifting her up and down my shaft, like some sort of living sex tow, I did all the work.

Up. "OOOHHH!"

Down. “MMMMnnnn!”

Up. “HNgggh!”

Down. “Aggggh!”

Over and over, we moved. I moved. I usually liked having a bit more back and forth with my partners, but she was just so… *willing*. Her entire body was entrusted to me to do with as I please.

That power was intoxicating, and I drew nearer and nearer to my own orgasm.

Then two pairs of cool blue arms wrapped around my shoulders from behind.

Turning slightly, I saw the impassive face of one of Ranni’s doll bodies meeting my eyes from less than an inch away.

“Thou art using me, my Lord Husband,” the doll said. Even as her actual body buckled and heaved in my arms, as her vaginal walls pulled and writhed, trying to draw my orgasm from me, the voice was monotone. I found that incredibly erotic for some reason. “I, the goddess of the chill night, am thine living doll. To use at thy pleasure.”

Her words, the calm monotone contrasting with her dirty words, sent me over the edge.

The doll disappeared as Ranni lost what little concentration she had as my cum spilled into her with the force of a canon. I held her tight, her thighs flush against mine as I emptied myself into her. Blast after blast of ropey fluid was emptied into her.

If it wasn’t for my control of my fertility and my unique nature as a Great One, I was sure we’d be seeing the birth of a draconic demigod in nine months.

As it was, Ranni’s small stomach looked slightly bloated from the amount. I can do better.

“Ah,” Ranni finally sighed, her most recent and largest orgasm petering out even as I held her in place on my still rock-hard cock. “How wonderful, my Lord. We hath finally become one.” It was illegal how wholesome she could be after what had just happened.

“Yep,” I said as I leaned in to give her a quick peck on the lips. She covered her cheeks in embarrassment. How cute. “Now for the rest of your punishment.”

Smack!

“Eeep!”

I’d ask her about Melina after we were done.

Smack!

In a few hours.

Author's Note:

I wanted this to be out yesterday, but IRL stuff prevented me from doing the final edit, so here it is. I hope it makes up for the very short Interlude.

My second sex scene.

*I am happy with how it turned out, and I will start weaving them into the story rather than having them stay as side stories. This one obviously took place between Emancipation 5 and 6. I will try out different scenes with different women, lining them up with their characters to get better at writing them and working on their flow. I don't intend to sacrifice the main story for it, but I expect more now that Emancipation is done. I will mark any chapter with sex in it with an (A) in its title so people know what to expect without having to cut out the scenes with *warnings* in the middle of the chapter that I don't like.*

QUESTION CORNER I

Here is the Question Corner promised. I gave it an extra bit of time to give those who were waiting for Emancipation to finish time to catch up. This doesn't cover nearly all the questions asked but I left out a good chunk because I felt I wouldn't be able to answer without spoilers.

Q: If someone kills his Avatar would it come back and if so would it be weakened and if so what would the weakening do to him

A: As stated in the fic, the Dragon is his real body. If his avatars are destroyed, he can build a new one (they mentioned trying it early in Emancipation), but it would default to his Great One body. That is why he needed Panacea on a retainer rather than just once. He keeps his Dragon body isolated in his pocket dimension so that Dragon Aura doesn't infect the world and, so long as it lives, he is as immortal as he was during the games. This also means the women are too, thanks to the Warranty.

Q: One of the stated ways of getting out of the Fromsoft prison worlds was "If you manage to reach 'max level', meaning get to a level of power where you can't grow anymore, the excess will flow to the Dragon waking it up.", how close to this did he unknowingly get in any of the game worlds?

A: When I imagined the games as 'real', the size naturally became much larger. (For most of them. Bloodborne was the exception because it is all located, with some exceptions, in one city.) Even though Mikael died a lot due to not being a video game character, he did kill a lot of people. The thing to be aware of is that there is no NG+. In DS1 you need about 1.7 billion souls to reach max stats, 400 million in DS2, 2.63 billion in DS3, 1.7 billion in Elden Ring, and 600 million for bloodborne. Those are some absurd numbers for one man to kill (even counting boss souls in the hundred thousand ranges and the weakest enemies giving you 30~.) It is *possible*, given the size of these worlds, but it is not something that can be done accidentally. The closest Mikael came was in DS2 and bloodborne. The former because he spent centuries wandering the land and the later because he delved pretty deeply into the chalice dungeons.

There is a reason Death thought he would be able to break free in Bloodborne after all.

Q: Couldn't Maliketh's black blade just kill Doomsday? Isn't it conceptual death inducement?

A: The knife? No. It is explicitly stated that the rune of death no longer resides in it.

The Spell? Possibly. I'll get into Mikael's reasoning and mindset in the chapter this

week. I'll just say that killing Doomsday is pretty easy, all things considered. The heroes did it thrice. It is making sure he stays dead that is the problem.

Q: Yeah, It was a truly comic worlds with logic that came with it. Not really that happy about it but what can I do? I'm just a simple Watcher.

A: This is something I feel I should make clear to all.

This story, the one I have always wanted to write, is a comic book one. Not just set in their world but a comic-based story. I will try and avoid the problems that come with that, but the entire reason I started writing this was because I wanted to write a comic book story through the lens of a WC fic. I wanted to explore characters, themes and ideas that have drawn me to these stories over the years. I wrote a 150k origin story. In later fics, if I decide to write them, I will probably write different types of stories, but for this one, it cannot be wholly separated from comics. I just hope people will enjoy it. I certainly have.

This will do for now. I'll see you all in a few days.

Furlough

FURLOUGH I

I, I will be king
And you, you will be queen
Though nothing will drive them away
We can beat them, just for one day
We can be heroes, just for one day
And you, you can be mean
And I, I'll drink all the time
'Cause we're lovers, and that is a fact
Yes we're lovers, and that is that
Though nothing will keep us together
We could steal time just for one day
We can be heroes for ever and ever
What d'you say?

Sitting atop the massive corps of Doomsday, facing the battered forms of the greatest heroes this world had to offer and surrounded by almost my entire Family, I should have felt like the king of the world.

It was similar to that bland board room with Death and the Company rep.

Only this time, I was the eldritch abomination from beyond time and space that held all the power.

I fought back a sigh.

I had made mistakes.

While I hadn't cared about Superman dying or any other heroes, as I had never met any of them, I should have thought about Diana.

The entire reason I had Artoria distract her with a visit to her hometown was so she wouldn't be forced to face people that looked like her former friends.

Therein lay the difference between the Amazon and me.

To me, the people of this world were not her friends. Though they may look the same, wear the same costume, and have the same faces, there was no guarantee they had the same personalities. That made them strangers. Superman could be a Hydra agent for all I knew.

I had treated this world as almost wholly foreign, never acting on my 'knowledge' of comics and Worm until I verified it. The crossover nature of the world ensured some things would be different.

Doomsday was the same.

Superman probably would have died to the alien alone, even without Crawler's

powers. Nothing I had seen pointed to the contrary.

Still, I gave it even odds the Kryptonian would survive, however. Nothing stopped someone like Steven Strange from popping up, opening a portal underneath the beast into the heart of a star.

Either way, no skin off my back. Of course, that changed when my plastic surgeon joined the battle.

I had been present for the fight since Amy and Victoria had appeared with this world's version of Wonder Woman. We had been flying, invisible and soundless, for ten minutes as we watched the fight.

If I thought I could have beat the alien, I would have stepped in and 'saved the day'. Crawler's powers were a game-changer, and we had spent a good portion of the time there spitballing about how we could kill it permanently.

By that point, Flash had been on rescue duty, so nobody had really died so long as they could keep it out of population centers.

We eventually decided to step in if they allowed it closer to the coast. I, Tsunade, and Yoruichi would appear and knock it as far as we could into the ocean with a surprise attack. From there, Scathach's and Medea's dragon forms should be able to kill it and blast the chunks to smithereens.

Even then, that plan had a lot of 'what ifs'.

I was a coward at heart. Risking myself was easy. If my body died, I'd recreate it, and that would be that.

Risking my family? When I had no guarantee of success? Not a chance. Not even if I knew they would probably come back. I wasn't willing to risk their loss.

Not for a bunch of strangers I had never met.

For Diana, the situation was different. She didn't even need to deliberate.

The Superman of her world HAD died to Doomsday. Seeing the situation as a repeat of that, it made perfect sense that she would have gone to help, even just as an act of kindness. Artoria, the spirit of chivalry that she was, would not have stopped her.

That is what makes them heroes.

I should have seen it coming.

Not to stop them, of course.

I stood by my promise to support their endeavours as they did me. Even if I was not a hero and had no desire to be one, I had nothing against heroes, and if any of the Family wanted to get into heroics, I didn't mind giving them a hand.

But I would have talked them out of their half-assed scheme on how to kill the creature. For over five minutes, I had watched Diana fight the alien, hoping she was

following some plan I had not thought of.

She hadn't been.

I side-eyed the Godslaying Blade still impaled in the alien's skull.

Now it was up to me to fix this mess.

If they wanted to be heroes, it was up to me to ensure they survived the attempt.

"So glad you all could make it," I said with a smile. Fake it till you make it, Mikael. Even when you have no control over the situation, act like you do. Just like in that board room. Even if you can't control anything, even if you are scrambling mentally, never let them see you sweat. "I think we were rudely interrupted back there, but no harm, no foul. We can start over. So, why are you all ruining my vacation?"

Engaging from a position of strength was rarely a bad thing. Looking down at the battered group, two dozen strong at least, I definitely held all the cards if we were to negotiate.

But this wasn't a negotiation.

Negotiation implied they had a choice.

I would drag them to my desired outcome kicking and screaming.

Now, what was my desired outcome?

"So sorry we inconvenienced you, your majesty," Iron Man drawled sarcastically, the last word almost spit. He hadn't retracted his helmet, and his armour was dirted and dented in places but largely undamaged. He had kept to the air, acting more as an annoying distraction to Doomsday than a direct combatant. "I'm sure we-"

"Pardon my friend," Captain America said, interrupting his fellow avenger before he could say anything more. "We appreciate your aid in killing the beast. I fear what would have happened had it reached the city."

"Beast?" I asked, pretending to not understand. I appreciated my companions leaving the talking to me for the moment. It gave me time to bullshit my way out of this. "You mean Doomsday here?" For emphasis, I patted the boney exoskeleton. More than one hero flinched. "You shouldn't thank me. Thank my wives." I nodded at Diana and Artoria. Multiple pairs of eyes had never left the two, particularly Wonder Woman and Myrddin, focusing intensely. "To be honest, I didn't think I needed to intervene. You all should have been more than capable of putting him down eventually, should you have brought your all to bear. Such as those who tried to stop me from landing."

I said it with a smile, even as some in the small crowd winced. I was asking for more information and scrambling for time mentally. Where were Strange, Shazam, Dr. Fate, Eidolon, and a whole bunch of other heroes they should have been able to call upon? A good chunk were still in Australia, unable to travel to the other side of the world unaided,

but some of their heaviest hitters should have been able to get here in time to be helpful.

"You seem to know a lot about this… Doomsday," the Martian Manhunter said as he eyed me suspiciously, deflecting my questions with a pointed one of his own.

"Gee, I wonder why?" I replied sarcastically, my eyes clearly moving toward Diana. The one on my side. Man, this was going to be confusing. "It's almost as if I know someone who fought it before. It's not like different timelines are a proven thing after all." Even more, eyes looked at the Amazon on my side as they realized how much knowledge she might provide.

Or already had provided to me.

I was good at improvisation, and this white lie would cover a lot of information I might accidentally reveal and any errors in knowledge.

Krypto the Wonder Dog is a chihuahua here? Must be a different timeline.

I shuddered at that image. If I discovered a world like that, I was destroying it for the good of the multiverse. A chihuahua with superpowers was the worst thing I could imagine.

"Boss! So uncool!" Glory Girl flew over the invisible line that separated my Family from the heroes, uncaring for the tension in the air. Amy flew behind her, starting and stopping as she got used to her new Kryptonian biology. I had expected her to pull something like this when I removed the limits of her shard. I would have gone for something like Beast Boy myself, but Kryptonians are a close second place. "You never told me you were married to a version of Di! Or that King Arthur was a girl! Do you know how awesome that is? Do you?"

"Vicky!" Amy hissed as she came to a stuttering stop beside her sister, grabbing her arm and trying to drag her away from the prying eyes of everyone on the wrecked field.

"Relax, Ames," Glory Girl said as she shook off her sister. "We won. Di kicked its ass, and the Boss helped. Other Di? Anyway, everyone can chill. It's time to celebrate." All the other heroes watched the pair like hawks, ready to launch themselves at a moment's notice. To stop the girls or attack me, I didn't know. Victoria remained unconcerned. "Come on, Boss! Introduce me to everyone."

"You know, I have been terribly rude myself," I said, even as I was compelled to follow her order. I looked to the heroes, my mind running at the speed of light. "We are all familiar with you due to the news, but we should have introduced ourselves. I am Mikael, Queen of England."

There was a beat of confused silence.

"Sir Mikael!" Artoria cried in disbelief at my words, flushing red. Yoruichi snorted in amusement, and more than one smirk was sent at the blonde knight. I couldn't help but

giggle to myself at her outcry.

My joke defused the tension as intended. I saw Flash crack a smile and Myrddin looked poleaxed.

“As you never died nor abdicated, you are still king,” I continued with a teasing grin. I lay my chin in my hand, tapping my fingers to my ears in fake thought. I hoped Emma would get the message from wherever she was watching this from. “Since we are essentially married, that makes me queen.”

“That…” Artoria paused, face still red, trying to find words to deny me but unable to.

“Hold up,” Iceman, the x-man, held up his hand. “If you are King Arthur and a girl, how did…” The young man started to say, but Artoria’s intense gaze made him stutter. “I mean Guinevere, Lancelot, Morgana… Mordred?”

“““““““““““““Merlin.”””””””””””””””

It said something about the ancient wizard that, when prompted, everyone in the Family said his name as if that answered everything. Even Ranni and Melina, who hadn’t spent nearly as much time with the King, still knew enough to answer the same as the others.

“I get it, I get it,” the young mutant said, backing up with his hands in the air. He half-ducked behind the metal frame of Colossus. “Touchy subject.”

“Why don’t you all introduce yourselves?” I asked the rest of the Family. Partly to fulfill Victoria’s order and buy me time to think.

“Very well,” Artoria nodded imperiously, her flush receding at this opportunity to change the subject. She looked out over the heroes as if she was looking out on her own soldiers, her innate charisma drawing every eye to her. “Those of you who took refuge in my hall have heard me. I shall repeat myself for those who have returned from recovery. I am Artoria Pendragon.”

I let my eyes drift from the heroes and towards the Godslaying Blade.

I was good at making shit up and distracting people, but I needed to focus on what I wanted out of this situation.

What were my victory conditions?

“To avoid confusion, please simply call me Diana.”

They were almost the same as when I confronted Flash earlier. Present myself as powerful enough that bothering me cannot be done easily but is not a threat. I hadn’t been lying when I told them I was on vacation. I wanted to be left alone.

“Medea of Colchis,” Caster said shortly, surveying the heroes.

My initial goal had been to present myself as a passive third party. Someone who won’t do anything and will not get involved if left alone. Not an enemy, but also not an

ally. Switzerland in this topsy-turvy world of heroes and villains.

"Senju Tsunade." "Nico Robin." "Shihouin Yoruichi." The big three, as I liked to call them, responded just as shortly. Like Medea and I, they preferred not to spill any more information than necessary.

I know them leaving me entirely alone was impossible. I was too great a power for that, but I simply didn't want to have heroes breathing down my neck every time I left the Island. A wary caution was acceptable, but not harassment.

"Scathach, Queen of the Lands of Shadow." While not as imperious as Artoria, the Celt was no less elegant in her declaration.

Want to spy on me? Fine. If I was them, I would like to spy on me too. I didn't really care about that at this point. They already had a good idea of my power by now. A few aces in the sleeve would remain hidden, but if they were just going to watch me with spy drones, I could live with that.

Interrupt my dates? You better be prepared to die… or be pranked back into the stone age. When I talked about my 'vacation', I wasn't talking about doing anything. There would be touristy shit, and all but the real key was to spend time with the Family.

They had supported me from the sidelines for a year with no reciprocity, and I had watched them the entire time. But, barring Ranni and Melina, we had minimal time together. This first world, while I waited for Death to contact me and figure out a way to get to tier 11, was a time for us to grow this relationship.

To become a Family.

"I am Glynda Goodwitch. It is a pleasure." There was more than one snigger in the crowd, and Glynda sighed. Since coming to this world, she had seen the Wizard of Oz.

She wasn't amused.

On the subject of not looking like a threat and not getting involved, Diana and Artoria had fucked me over completely. That part of my victory condition was no longer applicable.

So change victory conditions.

"Greetings, heroes from another world. I am Melina." She did a little curtsy. Her introduction was the humblest and friendliest, drawing some smiles from the crowd of heroes.

Instead of a passive third party, become someone they can't afford to offend for an entirely different reason.

A plan was starting to come together in my mind.

"We have been introduced," Ranni said scathingly, looking at Superman, Wonder Woman, Iron Man and Martian Manhunter with disapproval. Some others looked at her in

confusion, probably unaware of their encounter in space.

"Behave, Ranni," I said in a teasing voice. Her cheeks flushed, likely remembering her… punishment.

"As my Lord Husband commands," she nodded demurely at me before turning back to the heroes. "I am Ranni, Goddess of the Chill Moon. 'Tis my Order which blesses thy skies." More than one onlooker turned their heads upwards to look at the Dark Moon inlaid with Golden Rings.

"Right!" I said, clapping my hands together. "Introductions out of the way, let's get comfortable. Tsunade, if you would?" The ex-Hokage nodded in understanding before stomping the ground. Hard. More than one hero flinched as rows of wooden benches rose for them to sit on. The blonde had also made proper seats for those of the Family. They weren't anything fancy, but they were definitely better than benches. All ten of the women sat down as if on a throne. I fought a chuckle at the non-too-subtle power move. They could be just as petty as me when they wanted to be, and the trio were some of the least impressed with this world's 'heroes'. "Then you can answer my question on why you all thought it was a good idea to try and surround my Family and me while we were enjoying our breakfast."

Another collective flinch as a few decided to take a seat. Some looked grateful for the opportunity to get off their feet. Others remained standing. I knew why they had done so. I had set the trap, after all. I also didn't really blame them for it. I would have also taken the bait if I were in their position.

Didn't change the fact that I would use it to my advantage. Barring unique circumstances, like with Malenia, I was the type to use everything I could.

Hypocritical? Definitely. Did I care? Not even a little.

My new victory conditions needed me to be seen as a 'misunderstood' victim and the heroes to be the victimizers. Was I powerful? Certainly. But I needed to shift my image from a threat to a resource they did not want to antagonize and the one public would not allow them to.

"We'd be happy to talk with you now that we have the opportunity," Captain America said with a tight smile. He, Superman, and Wonder Woman had gravitated a few feet in front of the rest to act as spokesmen for this little talk. All of the three had yet to take a seat. "Though, I ask that we do so at a later time. Right now, people need help. The monster carved its way here from Clevland, and there are many injured, and we need to aid with the rescue efforts."

I could see his logic. Flash had been on rescue effort this entire time, but not even he could grab everyone or ensure those he did rescue were healed. The minutes after a

disaster were critical to ensuring the most people survived.

Not only was he right, rescue efforts were ongoing, and as heroes, they would want to help that, but it would also give them the needed time to talk. They were all healed thanks to Amy but were still tired. Several heroes were also looking confused about this whole situation.

Playing for time would give them time to rest and get everyone on the same page so they could present a united front like we were. It would also allow them to reset the dynamic. Right now, my side held every single advantage.

With one small request, Captain America did the right thing morally and started the process to wipe away all the disadvantages his side was facing.

Too bad he had given me exactly what I needed.

"Hm," I pretended to give it some thought before declaring firmly. "No." It was amusing how they all tensed, looking angry that I wouldn't 'let them go'. "You all cost me too much of my time with my family with your ineptitude already. I would rather get this out of the way now and move on with my life." A few looked ready to fight again, but I cut them off before they could argue. "Melina."

As I said her name, I used a Command Seal to connect us, the red glow hidden below my shirt.

Fun fact about seals, not only could they be used to give orders, but they had a whole bunch of other uses. Healing was one of them, like what Emma and I had lied about using, but also empowering. The seals were usually powered by the Holy Grail, almost like limited-use batteries of power, but my set of six were all powered by me. The more power I had, the more power they did.

And I had unlimited power.

My maiden turned to look at me, and I nodded at the heroes. "Would you plant a tree? It's about five hundred kilometres to Cleavland, right?" I asked Superman, who nodded slightly. I turned back to Melina. "No need to go all out then. About the size of the Weeping Peninsula will do."

Without a word, she raised a hand into the air. A massive golden circle blazed itself into the air. The symbol of the Erdtree and the Crucible hung for a moment, numerous heroes shooting to their feet in shock and fear before the glow faded.

In its place, a titanic golden tree grew.

It was smaller than the Erdtree of Leyndell, but not by much. If Melina had used all the power I provided, she could have created something big enough to cover the entire northern hemisphere. Still, I had deliberately asked her to keep it contained.

More than one hero looked on in shock as its golden glow surrounded us. We were in

its trunk but could still look up to see its golden canopy, well above the clouds, rained ephemeral golden leaves upon the entirety of New England. The sheer spectacle and beauty even captured the attention of the rest of the Family, and I saw more than one of them give Melina reevaluating looks.

As the leaves fell, they healed all that fell under their glow.

It wouldn't regrow limbs, cure cancer, or even help with diabetes, but it would do the job. Nobody from Boston to Cleavland to South Carolina would die any time soon. The heroes, too, looked reinvigorated. Unlike Amy's healing, it also restored exhaustion.

It would be a sleepless night in New England.

It was one of the few spells I didn't know since I had already been able to heal myself by the point I had seen Melina use it the first time we faced Morgott together.

After less than a minute, the titanic tree faded, leaving the dim glow of twilight to consume us once more.

Melina hadn't even stood from her seat to perform the spell.

"There we go," I said casually as if the feat my maiden had just performed was an everyday thing. I was crafting an image of the Family. One of benevolence but overwhelming power. I wanted the mere idea of trying to impede us to seem insanity. The display also obfuscated the truth that Melina was, by far, our weakest link. She was a skilled warrior, but she lacked the power of Ranni and the versatility of the other women. She hadn't even discovered her semblance, for god's sake, nor practiced with Haki.

When it was just me, I was all for tossing aside my image and acting like a fool but, now that I was a family man, I sided with Ranni.

Image was necessary in a world of heroes and villains.

"Is there anything else stopping this conversation now?" I asked Captain America with a smile.

"Ah," he stammered slightly, eyes wide. "We still need to rescue those trapped by rubble and aid in reconstruction efforts." He was grasping at straws in my eyes. Not wrong, but obviously searching for excuses.

As if I'd let him.

"Glynda." This time, I didn't even need to clarify my request. The former huntress stood from her seat with a sigh. I would make it up to her later.

She stepped quickly from the gathering of people, even the crowd of reporters and onlookers that we had started gathering in the less than ten minutes since Doomsday had fallen.

Once she was far enough away from the group, she transformed.

""Woah.""

““Jesus Christ!””

There was a collection of intakes of breaths and exclamations of surprise as the seven-foot-tall blonde transformed into the ‘small’ dragon. Only three stories tall, she was beautiful to my eyes. She was a western-style dragon, like me, but much more svelt and serpentine. Her scales were a purplish white, and her wings, one large pair and a smaller pair around her waist, had a darker purple hue.

Glynda hated it.

She claimed it reminded her too much of the Grimm she had fought for her to feel comfortable in its skin.

Nevertheless, none of the Family could deny the usefulness of the dragon forms. Not only were they highly mobile, giving flight to those who lacked it, but they were also stronger and tougher than their regular bodies.

Most valuable were the elements they provided. Per the catalogue, the women would gain one of my elements unless they had a more fitting one based on their personalities and themes. Only Tsunade and Diana shared an element with me. The rest were not so attuned to Life or Freedom and thus gained their own.

Glynda had gained the element of ‘telekinesis’. It was one of the ‘weakest’ of the family and thus grew the fastest, except Emma’s diamond element. By transforming, her semblance was enhanced in power and her range and control shot through the roof. Combine it with her mastery of Observation Haki, and Glynda, despite only being tier 7, could pull shit similar to a Pheonix powered Jean Grey in her limited expertise.

The dragon took off with barely a movement of air, heading west by northwest along the trail of destruction that Doomsday had carved on his way eastward. Even as she passed, dirt filled in holes, roads reformed, trees replanted, and buildings rebuilt.

In the short time, it would take her to reach Cleaveland, it would be like Doomsday never existed.

“Now,” I said, letting my smile drop. There was a stunned silence in the air as they realized they were not staring at one dragon but ten. “Let’s have that talk.” I used one of the less-known abilities of Dragon Aura.

The Fear.

I flared my power, and I could see the instinctual response of those gathered. The regular people, onlookers and reporters could sense nothing. They were below tier 4.

Everyone above that? They were confronted with Fight, Flight, or Fuck instincts. It wouldn’t make anyone fall in love with me, not when they were only exposed for a few seconds, at most a flare of lust, but it forced everyone to acknowledge my power.

As kind and benevolent as I was acting, I needed them to understand I wasn’t a hero.

To their credit, not one of the heroes gathered ran despite their instincts. A few stepped back, but that was it. I could see the fear in their eyes, the lust in a few women, but they all stood firm in opposition to me. When confronted with Fight, Flight, or Fuck, they had all chosen to fight.

Only they couldn't fight.

In less than a minute, I had turned my Family into untouchables, and I could see that a few of the more intelligent heroes could see it.

We had healed entire states.

We were rebuilding homes.

Anyone who attacked us now would be vilified in an instant.

There were plenty of strong heroes. But how many could make a disaster like Doomsday have never happened? Only the strongest of reality warpers and those rarely cared for the common man. Any hero or villain that tried to fight Glynda or Melina would be lynched by everyone they met. The protection Panacea enjoyed before she became the Red Queen would be nothing compared to what people worldwide would provide to my Family.

And I wasn't done yet.

I had gotten good at fighting over centuries of experience, I enjoyed a good fight, but combat had never been my specialty.

It was lies, politics, subterfuge, and manipulation.

I liked to think I used these abilities, vile as some would find them, to good ends. Was it wrong to manipulate Solaire, the Chaos sisters, Lucatiel, Sirris, and others to ensure their happy ending? It was undoubtedly underhanded, but I never thought it was bad.

This carrot and stick game I was playing with the heroes of this world was all in the service of the Family.

My wives wanted to be heroes? Fine. Let me set the field for them. They were strong, some even able to kick my ass unless I was in my main body, but that didn't stop me from worrying about them.

I was paranoid like that.

If they were going to be on the front lines against Doomsday, Thanos, Darkseid, Molecule Man, Magneto, Galactus, Endbringers, or any other absurdly powerful beings in this world, then I wanted to stack the deck in their favour.

I was a big fish in an ocean, and there were sharks in these waters. I couldn't fight all their battles, nor would I want to. Look at Doomsday. If I had tried to fight him with anything less than my whole body, he would have beaten me like a redheaded stepchild.

So, let's mobilize an army for them.

My new victory conditions were this: Make my family sacrosanct.

I wanted the heroes of this world ready to throw themselves between them and everything that could harm them. Both because of how valuable they were and out of fear of what I would do should anything happen to them.

Warranty did not make them expendable in the least to me.

“We meant no disrespect,” Wonder Woman, the one from this world, spoke up as I let the Fear fade. “My comrades and I were just nervous when one of your… station decided to visit our home. Surely you can understand our caution?”

“I do understand,” I nodded at her, my glare softening but not allowing a smile to form. “Caution is rarely something I find fault in. But, as I understand your position, so must you understand mine too. I have just regained a human form and was looking to spend time with my family. Imagine you were separated from your family for a long time. Right when you get the chance to spend quality time with them, you find yourself accosted by groups making spurious claims and posing themselves for a fight.”

A bunch of the crowd shuffled awkwardly at my words.

It was a long-held problem of comics, the homelife vs. the costumed life.

I was sure everyone standing before me had a date or anniversary interrupted by some villain attack or the equivalent. I was banking on that empathy.

Rational but empathetic.

Kind, yet not a pushover.

Powerful, but not a threat.

I was building my image, one sentence at a time.

And I didn’t even need to lie.

“You have made no attempt to open a dialogue before now,” Wonder Woman pressed, unwilling to concede the point. “We have had no choice but to look upon you distrustfully.”

“You are wrong,” I said with certainty. “I did try and open a dialogue. Well before I even reached earth, in fact. Acting as my Herald and Guiding Moonlight, Ranni flew ahead of my path. Specifically to alert people and clear the way so there wouldn’t be any conflict.” I nodded at Ranni. I saw some look at her in surprise, likely those who knew nothing of the confrontation in space. I wasn’t only speaking for the benefit of those gathered here. Everyone in the world would watch this on the news. This was me controlling a narrative. “Did Ranni not tell you that I was coming? Did she not try and talk you down from attacking me? Did she not tell you I would help you when you told her you were readying to fight a Lord of Chaos? And when you mistook me for that Lord of Chaos, did she not tell you I was not?”

“Hold on-” Iron Man tried to interrupt me, likely realizing what I was doing, but I kept going.

“I admit, her words might have confused you since she comes from a more militaristic culture, but you cannot deny that she tried to dissuade you from fighting as much as possible. And when it came to blows, did anyone die? Before you tried to attack me, she fought to injure, not kill. Even when you attacked me unprovoked, did I hurt anyone? And when I reached earth, did I not destroy one of these Endbringers that has laid waste to your world? Even as you all tried to slay me? When I reached out to the Sorcerer Supreme as a kindness, warning him of a potential world-ending catastrophe, did he not attack me on sight? He called me an abomination less than an hour before I helped rescue the citizens of one of your greatest cities from a rampaging maniac.”

There was some awkward shuffling as I spun my weave. Nothing I said was untrue, so they couldn’t refute it. They could and would use only a few arguments, and I was prepared for them.

“Answer me this, heroes of earth. Have I, since arriving on this planet, hurt anyone? Have I been anything less than a blessing to your world? Even now, my family has slain a beast you could not put down. We have healed your wounded and are rebuilding your cities. Have we earned any distrust from you?”

“The people who disappeared onto that Island. Are they still alive?” Captain America asked grimly.

“I have no idea,” I admitted, half honestly. I could be omniscient there, like during the Dreaming, but it would require my whole focus. I would be trading the ability to control a body for the ability to watch grass grow. Not worth it.

“How can you not know?”

“Because the island is fucking huge!” I answered strongly. That was true. Unless I wrapped the entire thing in my power, like when I Dreamt, I had no way of observing every part of the Island. Instead, I had set ‘rules’ with Medea’s help using innumerable bounded fields and my limitless power. “And I don’t care how people try and commit suicide. That is why only those with purely malicious intent can enter! They had to be completely irredeemable! I am not trying to protect myself from you all. I’ve already proven you can’t hurt me. I am trying to protect your world from mine. The things that call my Island home would kill all who enter it and drive your civilization back to the stone age should they be released!”

I had set that up with Medea early on to get bodies for our experiments in a way the more heroic-minded of our Family couldn’t complain about. Ethically sourced human bodies for me to try out. Most turned to mush. I’m sure Medea the cat was also getting her

fair share of extra food from the invaders.

I always knew my lovable floof ball was a psychopath. Reaching Tier 6 and having the power to back it up had only made her cuter to me.

“You’ve conquered worlds,” Iron Man said, finally getting a word in as I finished my tirade. “Blueberry admitted to that, and you agreed when you met Professor X. Of course, we will distrust you. How do we know the earth isn’t your next conquest!”

“You will return the same courtesy we have given you,” I said seriously, letting the Fear spread again. I let it go after a second. “After aiding you, we have introduced ourselves. You will maintain basic courtesy and use our names, or I shall pull my blade from Doomsday and let him finish what he started. Do not mistake our kindness for weakness.”

“It’s still alive?!” Superman asked in shock as every hero rose to their feet, and numerous onlookers backed away.

“Of course it is!” I said, not minding their shock or the disapproving looks Diana and Artoria were shooting me. Just as I knew the Simurgh was utterly dead, I knew that Doomsday was ‘dead’ but not permanently. He kept trying to revive himself, but the time aspect of the blade kept killing him as he healed. The second I pulled the sword from his skull, he would be on his feet again, likely with a second head with a second Corona Pollentia, so the same thing couldn’t kill him again. The greatest threat the combination of Doomsday and Crawler posed wasn’t his mutation while he was alive but how quickly it came back to life.

Comic characters were fucking absurd.

Of course, there was no way in hell I would pull the sword out, not when I had no good way of killing the thing again without blasting away the eastern seaboard, but the heroes didn’t need to know that. And it gave me a perfect excuse to lessen the power of my Godslaying Blade held in the eyes of the world.

I didn’t need a bunch of villains coming after my family and me because they thought I had an uber-weapon. Before revealing myself to Diana, I had already set up insurance for my other weapons. But the Godslaying Blade would draw extra attention since it was what felled the alien.

“If Thor came to you today, saying he is returning from a conquest, would you be as suspicious? Did any of you ask Ranni what she meant when she told you all I had ‘conquered’ worlds?” I asked the group, who were eyeing my ‘seat’ with wide eyes. That drew attention back to me and calmed a few down when it looked like I wouldn’t go through with my threat. “Why would she join me if I conquered her world? Surely you don’t think that Diana or King Arthur would side with someone who goes on world

conquest for fun? Ranni, Melina, tell them about the Lands Between. My most recent 'conquest'." I said sarcastically.

"When my Lord Husband arrived at our lands, the war of the Shattering had been ongoing for millennia," Ranni started without hesitation. By now, she understood what I was building towards. Of the Family, she, Emma, and Medea were the most politically savvy. Just because she had goofed a bit with the initial meeting with the heroes didn't mean I couldn't trust her to have my back once I had updated her on how this world worked. "My half siblings, demigods all, were vying for the Elden Ring and the title of Elden Lord. He slew them all, restoring peace to the land." She didn't mention it was her assassination, with Marika's aid, of Godwyn the Golden that had kicked things off.

"That doesn't soun-" Superman's words were cut out by Melina.

"The first demigod he slew was Godrick, of the golden lineage," Melina said seriously. Her face, ordinarily impassive and unreadable, was tinged with visible disgust. "He was called the Grafted, as were others of his line. He sent out his soldiers to capture all who he could. He would cut their limbs from them, grafting the strongest onto his form and fashioning others onto children's bodies. These abominations served as the shock troops of his armies. I walked the halls of his castle. I saw the piles of flesh, the limbs hanging from the rafters, and the feral dogs glutting themselves upon the bloody remains." Numerous people looked sick, and a few of the crowd of civilians actively vomited at the imagery. "Godrick's passing was celebrated throughout the land."

"My Lord is not without mercy," Ranni picked up where Melina left off. "As I mentioned when we first met. When he reached the Raya Lucaria, where my mother was held prisoner. After he slew those who held her captive, he spared her life and those of her entourage even as they attempted to kill him."

I opened my mouth, ready to move onto the next stage of my plan, my point having been made, but Melina continued.

"Next to fall was General Radhan," she said to her captivated audience. "The Starscourge was the mightiest of the demigods. With his will and magic, he held the night sky's stars in place. But his was a cursed existence. Consumed from within by the Scarlet Rot, he wandered the shifting dunes as a mad dog, distinguishing neither friend nor foe. He would feast upon the bodies of the fallen." I'm sure some of the heroes were listening to learn more about me and my abilities, but I saw some people look genuinely invested in the story.

Which made me uncomfortable, to say the least.

I squirmed slightly in my seat.

"My brother's soldiers held a Festival of War every twenty years," Ranni continued

seamlessly. Was Emma ignoring me and allowing the two to communicate between themselves? Or were they just so in sync that they knew when the other would stop?
“They knew their general would wish to die in honourable combat rather than continue to waste away. For centuries, the Radahn Festival drew the greatest warriors of the land, all fighting to be the ones’ to slay the greatest demigod. None succeeded. Till my husband arrived.”

“For four days and four nights, he battled the Starcourge,” Melina picked up. For just a hint of a second, I caught her giving me a look. A slightly smug look. They were teasing me! Doing as I had asked but also taking the chance to see me squirm! The fiends! “Even after all other warriors fell to the general’s blades or his magic, Mikael stood defiant in the face of death. He slew the demigod and freed the stars from his control.”

“Morgott, the Omen King, responsible for the stalemate of centuries.” Ranni picked up. They were bragging about me, and there was nothing I could do about it without shattering the image of solidarity I had been working hard to project. Even the other women of the Family were looking at me with appraising eyes. They had never gotten the ‘full’ story from the two before. “Rykard, who unleashed untold blasphemies upon the lands. Malenia, the undefeated, the origin of the Scarlet Rot. She had unleashed the blight upon Aeonia. Once a vibrant place of beauty and life, Caelid became a fetid swamp, fit only for the rotted and the dying.”

“What did he do after slaying all those who had held the lands in the grip of war? After claiming the Elden Ring and becoming Elden Lord? After providing rest to the undying, rescuing those still living and setting up a refuge for those afflicted by the war?” Stop! Please stop it!

“He left,” Ranni said decisively. Oi! Don’t say it like it was my idea. It was you! I would have left anyway, but it was your idea to take the entire Order with us! “Even as the world cried out for his rule, even as countries bowed to him, begging him to be their Lord, he left. Taking the source of the conflict with him so the world might know. He never sought to rule. Only to liberate.”

That’s it! These two were not allowed to be alone together anymore! They were terrible influences on each other. They knew I hated attention, and while I was fighting my instincts to go out of my way to build an image now, they were teasing me.

Where was the Melina who blushed at the thought of sex? What happened to the little Ranni who would poke her fingers together cutely and not meet my eye.

Who had corrupted these sweet cupcakes? They became vixens who would tease their poor husband.

“It was the same in the other worlds,” Medea spoke up to the momentary silence after

Ranni's final declaration. She shot me a look as well, and it was all I could do to not show a glimpse of betrayal on my face. Et Tu, Medea? "He arrived in a world consumed by a curse of the undead. They had swallowed kingdoms and would eventually drown the world in the abyss. The only way to stop it was for him to give himself up to burn upon sacred flames. He burned for thousands of years so that others may live. When the curse returned, he built a world for survivors to escape. That is how he 'conquers' worlds! With power, certainly. But mostly with kindness, compassion, and a willingness to fight and die for the freedom of others."

Betrayal. Mutiny. This a Coup! I could have brushed it off if anything they said was a lie. But it wasn't.

It wasn't the whole story, but nothing they said was wrong. I *had* gone out of my way to give people happy ends. Only I had done it for the selfish reason that I liked those people, not some noble spirit of altruism.

Like all great betrayals, the most significant blow from who you least suspected.

"Indeed," Artoria spoke up, her chin lifted proudly as if speaking of her own achievements. Stawp! "I would count Sir Mikael as the bravest, kindest, and noblest of my Knights of the Round."

Artoria's words, delivered without the intent to tease and purely from her genuine belief, dealt the final blow.

I felt my cheeks redden.

The looks sent my way by my family, full of teasing and honest smiles, were nothing compared to the looks I was getting from the crowd.

Stop it!

I was a dragon the size of a continent! I was a horror the human mind could not comprehend! I was older than humanity itself in this world! I can destroy this planet with a sneeze! I was ready to let Superman die and was actively manipulating the entirety of the world!

So stop looking at me like that! Like I'm some sort of Dragon Jesus, ready to sacrifice myself for your sins. Die for your own sins, for all I care!

I wasn't a hero!

I didn't want to be a hero!

Heroes don't get happy endings!

"Right," I coughed into one hand, trying to get things back on track. "As I said, all this distrust could have been avoided if you had simply asked Ranni a few clarifying questions. Is it any wonder we've tried to stay out of the way? Even if I gained a human body, can you blame me for quietly trying to pass my time on this planet with my family?"

“On behalf of all of us here,” Superman said firmly, standing before the group. “I sincerely apologize for our actions. We were hasty and judgemental, and we have wronged you and your family.” As he bowed his head in apology, I blinked at him in surprise. Then I looked around at the other heroes. While a few were still side-eyeing me, nobody seemed outright distrustful or fearful anymore. The fuck? “While we might try to justify our actions, it is clear that you have done great good for the people of earth. Even if all you did was rid us of the Simurgh, we would not be able to thank you enough.”

Captain America looked deeply regretful. Wonder Woman was looking at Diana with… understanding? Iron Man wasn’t meeting anyone’s eyes. The Flash was rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. Glory Girl was nodding as if to say, ‘I told you so!’ Other heroes were giving out mutterings of apology, bowing their heads in shame or nodding their heads at Superman’s words.

Stop it!

This wasn’t how I planned things!

Where is your distrust? Your acknowledgment of the threat I pose? Your reluctant agreement to my words, as if prying them from your cold dead lips? Where was your paranoia?

Where was Batman!? He wouldn’t believe me! He has to be listening right now, right? Bring him out here, and he’ll bring you to your senses!

Why were you all so, so, so…. nice!? So good!?

You are seriously making me feel bad, damn it! Like I kicked a superpowered puppy.

“I accept your apology,” I said with a sigh, not letting on how much their… heroism affected me. Initially, I planned to paint them in a terrible light and then engage them with a compromise from my position of absolute strength. I saw the headlines in my head; ‘Justice League persecute poor dragon!’ ‘Are heroes bad?’ ‘A Family of Dragons; they are here to help!’ Now? There was no fun in kicking a good dog. The more I looked at their healed but dirty bodies, the worse I felt. I needed to get out of here. “Like I said, Ranni’s words must have confused you. Of course, even if I accept the apology, it still leaves us with a problem.”

“Thank you for your understanding,” Wonder Woman said. Stop it! “What sort of problem?”

“The problem of trust,” I said, reaching my final goal of this conversation. Let’s get this out of the way and go back to Australia. Simple and easy to understand Australia. Where everything tries to kill you. “You don’t trust me, which I can understand, and I don’t trust you after all your actions against my family and me.”

“I understand,” Superman said, still looking at me regretfully.

“More than that, I cannot trust you all with the defence of the earth,” I said. For the first time, the heroes looked genuinely insulted. Tough. “The earth has a special place in my heart,” I continued. “Not only do Victoria and Amelia call it home, but half of my family hail from it or a version of it. If Diana and Artoria hadn’t stepped in to help, would you have been able to kill Doomsday? And at what cost?” Though many people looked affronted at my words, none could deny the truth of the words themselves.

“What are you proposing?” Superman asked. God, the man looked so accepting. Stop being so naive, you doofus!

“I am on vacation,” I reiterated. “I don’t want to be disturbed when I am with my family. But not all of us want to stay out of conflict.” I turned to Scathach, silent until now. “Are you still interested in training a few protegees?” I asked. Her smirk was beautiful, though the heroes shivered for some reason. Weaklings. “Are you two still interested in heroics?” I turned to Diana and Artoria. The blonde simply nodded, but the amazon looked at me with slightly widened eyes.

Had I set this all up so Diana could spend time with her friends and be a hero again without all the suspicion and fear that being part of the Family would bring? Of course, I did.

My initial plan would have the relationship be more strained but with more power in our hands, but this worked out just as well. When I promised to support them wholeheartedly, I never intended to do things by half measure.

That it was a good excuse to open relations between the Family and the world was a happy little accident.

“There you go,” I said, standing from my seat atop Doomsday’s corpse. The rest of the Family also did so, their seats receding into the earth. “They will be around, either to train you or help you or act as heroes. Feel free to ask them questions, get to know them, and the like. We’ll stop by occasionally too. Trust isn’t built in a day but getting to know each other is a good first step.”

“We’d be happy to have them,” Superman said with a welcoming smile at Diana, who smiled back. Of course, you would, you big blue boy scout.

I sighed again.

Do you ever go into a conversation expecting it to be awkward, confrontational, or emotionally painful? Then it turns out you were worried over nothing? Then you are left feeling vaguely cheated? You got everything you wanted, but you feel bad about it?

That was me right now.

Glynda landed and transformed as I stepped down from the body. She shot me a look as she did, and I shook my head. I knew what she was asking, and I was giving them

enough rope to hang themselves by.

"I have repaired all the damage I could find," she said. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing important," I said. "We were just leaving."

"Boss?" Victoria asked. "You are already leaving?"

"I have a few things left to do, and a few of us will stay behind, but yes, I am returning to my vacation," I said. I wanted to relax and go for a flight to organize my thoughts. The young woman pouted at me. I rolled my eyes and smiled at her. "I'll be popping in and out occasionally. And I don't believe you've done all the Master/Stranger observation time. It's only been a few days. We can talk more when they are sure I'm not some mind-controlling megalomaniac."

"But it's sooo boring," she whined at me. I saw Amy, staying well away from us, roll her eyes. I chuckled, happy to see the sisters getting along.

"Much of life is," I nodded, feeling no sympathy. She could whine at me when she was trapped in a cell the size of a bathroom stall for months with no food, water, or anything to do. I was half sure my first death had been less me going crazy from my element than from sheer boredom.

"Before you go," Wonder Woman said as she walked up to me. Superman was right beside her. Now that I had expressed the intention to leave, it seemed to have broken what little tension remained. Myrddin was talking to Artoria animatedly. She looked at me for help, but I pretended not to see. Serves you right, you traitor! A few other heroes had approached some of the Family, but a good chunk were leaving. Probably for home. The sun had fully set by this point. "I have a question that needs answering."

"I have a few minutes," I nodded. I wasn't in any rush. I had expected all this to take way longer, and the only thing I had really booked was tickets to a show in the evening. It was barely eleven in the morning in the land down under. My desire to leave was because of all the eyes on me.

Journalists were waiting to descend like a pack of hyenas to a fresh corpse.

"What did you do to me?"

"Huh?" I asked, confused at the accusation amazon levied at me. I looked at Superman, but he nodded as if I should answer her.

"The dreams!" She clarified. Only not, really. "The knowledge! What are you trying to do to me!"

"I repeat my earlier question: Huh?" I was confused. Was she saying I was mastering her? But Dragon Aura isn't even active?

"Ever since you first landed, she's been having dreams." Superman finally explained. "Flashes of memories, not her own. Knowledge about you that she shouldn't have. Amelia

says she has eyes in her brain."

"Ah," I nodded in realization. "Insight. Maybe because of a resonance between my Diana and you? Either way, I can't help you. It isn't me doing it."

"What?" The local amazon didn't look too pleased by my words. "Can't or won't?"

"Both," I nodded at the two. I explained more clearly when it looked like Wonder Woman would punch me. "I can't control who gains insight or when. I try to limit people's exposure to my body to avoid situations like this. It is your mind reaching out to a truth your eyes can't understand. Only once it gets that truth, it can't handle it. The only way I can control it slightly is to carve runes, symbols of my language, into your flesh. I doubt you want me to do that to you."

"Is that the only way?" Superman asked worriedly. "And is this a risk to the public?"

"Have Amelia use her powers to replicate the runes on her," I said with a shrug. "She has enough insight that she should be able to do it correctly. As for a risk to the public? No. Now that I have a human body, there shouldn't be any risk of people gaining more insight unless through some sort of medium like my blood or certain rituals. I wasn't exaggerating when I said my pocket dimension protects you more than it protects me."

"That is a load off our minds," Superman nodded. I watched Scathach say something to Cyclops that had the mutant nodding. Perfect. "I do have one more question if you have the time?"

"Shoot," I said as I watched Captain America approach Melina. It was only my years of experience with the woman that allowed me to notice the way that she held herself. She was feeling very awkward. The man was likely thanking her for her healing. Serves her right.

"The beast, Doomsday as you called it, what can you tell me about it? And what is to be done with it?"

"You can ask Diana more about her experience with it," I nodded at the woman. Glory Girl had left us to go meet the newest 'Di'. "To make a long story short, a scientist created it to become the ultimate killing machine. That's where its official name comes from. The Ultimate. Doomsday is just a colloquial name." Superman's eyes widened slightly, but I continued on. "Start by taking a child, throw it on prehistoric krypton, and when it dies, retrieve the remains, clone it with the genetic memories, and throw it back down. Repeat until you have a creature that can survive anything. And if it dies? It will just come back stronger and meaner than before."

"Why did it come to earth?"

"I can't say for sure since there are differences between timelines," I clarified. "If it is the same as Diana's world? Then after killing the scientist who created it, it went on to

conquer a bunch of planets, killing all their inhabitants it could. One planet's main species banded together at some point and killed it. Unaware that it could come back to life, they jettisoned it into space, as was their custom. Through happenstance, it landed on earth. It's probably been here a while and just woke up and broke its way free of its coffin."

I left unsaid that Crawler's power had to be a recent addition. Something screwy was going on here.

"When it first appeared, one of its arms was still bound by a steel cable," Superman nodded in remembrance.

"And what's to be done with it? You said it is trying to return to life?" Wonder Woman pressed. For all that she looked the same as my Diana, she was brusquer. Less time in 'man's world' perhaps? "Are you going to leave that blade there? How long will it hold?"

"Leave my sword? Are you crazy? That's just asking for trouble," I said. "Although now that you mention it, that does remind me of something."

I turned from the pair and waved at Glynda, who had been talking to Green Lantern with Robin. They both came over.

"Do you two mind grabbing my weapons?" I asked, letting them know it was time to real in the fish. No way in hell I would leave without my collection.

Even if it was bait.

"Of course," Glynda nodded as she waved her ridding crop. Robin gave a sly smirk at me and held up five fingers.

There was a rush of sound, and multiple people ducked as numerous weapons flew at me. They all flew into the bottomless box, even the largest of weapons squeezing down to fit into the wooden crate the size of my palm.

"Is that all?" I asked rhetorically once the deluge of metal had finished. "I'm missing a few."

"One moment, dear," Glynda said with a smirk. "Some are coming from farther away."

Not even a few seconds later, the last five of my weapons returned to me. They were daggers and shortswords mostly. Easy things to hide. And they weren't alone.

""""""MPH""""""

Four people struggled fruitlessly in the air, bound by Glynda. None of them were familiar, nor in any sort of uniform.

"Who do we have here?" I asked, even as the heroes gave me a side-eye. More than a few looked like they were ready to step up if need be.

"An agent of SHIELD, AIM, the PRT, and an opportunist who wanted a souvenir,"

Robin answered my questions as she nodded at all in turn.

SHIELD and the PRT. It must be my birthday. The poor opportunist was crying.

"And this one," I nodded at the weapon that had returned without a passenger. Mytha's Bent Blade was covered in blood.

"An agent of the Hand," Robin said. "He was very… determined to keep hold of the blade. If anyone is interested, I believe his body is in his hideout in Winchester. He was contacting his handler when we took our weapon back, so I would hurry."

The Flash was gone in a flash. I was almost impressed that someone could get that far so quickly. It hadn't been that long since Doomsday had died. They must have picked up the weapon before the fight even ended.

"And you all thought it was a good idea to steal from a dragon," I asked dubiously at the struggling group. Their struggles were redoubled. "I should flay you all for the impertinence." Their struggle stopped.

"Do you mind leaving this to us?" Captain America asked as he approached, looking embarrassed but resigned. "There is no need for such harsh measures."

I knew someone would try and 'save' these people. I had been counting on it when I left my weapons for anyone to grab. Robin had a small eye and ear on every single one of them. I had initially wanted to use them as an example, but the heroes… hero-ness had shifted my plans.

Killing them slowly as an example would solidify my 'don't fuck with me' reputation, but it would also ruin all the good rep I had built.

"I can leave it to you," I nodded agreeably, a smile on my lips. Every one of my wives took a step back from me for some reason. "This time."

"I appreciate it," the good captain looked relieved.

"Diana will tell me what you do with them, anyway," I waived him off while warning him that I wouldn't let this be swept under the rug. I could hold this over their agencies' heads in the future, and it solidified my image as 'benevolent'. "Just one last weapon, then." I said as I turned to the 'corpse' behind me.

"Hold on-" Superman started.

He was cut off by the dying wails of the Dragonlord. Placidusax's ruin rained a golden tide of fire and lightning upon the corpse of Doomsday.

Could I have faced Doomsday?

No. For the same reason why I considered Flash the most dangerous League member, and I wouldn't have let Priscilla face him either.

Speed.

While I had no theoretical top speed, Doomsday would have turned me into paste

long before I could reach the likes of him, Superman or Diana. I didn't have the stats of a servant like Artoria or Scathach. My 'stats' were superhuman in strength, toughness, dexterity, and the like, but my base speed was only slightly faster than most heroes. I could let him pass through me while I gained momentum, but then what?

To kill Doomsday, you need to kill him conceptually or completely annihilate his body.

Priscilla is the only one of us who could do the former. If I had killed her and fashioned her tail and soul into weapons, I might have been able to do the same with a well-laid trap. But I liked my floofy dragon!

My other option? I had to deal enough damage to instantly vaporize him before he healed. If he was still alive, he would dodge. I wasn't a glass canon, but I also wasn't a nuke. I could output a lot of damage quickly, but not instantaneously.

Golden light bathed the area as I reduced everything about Doomsday to his component atoms. I kept the spell active for over a minute, ensuring not even a drop of blood remained.

When I finally cut off the spell, the titanic corpse was gone. In its place was a crater tens of meters deep. The Godslaying Blade, made from the corpse of the Dragonlord and immune to its breath, was impaled in the ground so far down that I had to squint to see it.

And I had night vision.

A simple flex of gravity magic and the blade returned to my hands.

"That should do it," I said as I sheathed the blade, turning back to the crowd.

One of Glynda's captives was unconscious.

The other three had growing wet spots on their pants.

"That was…" Wonder Woman stuttered, eyes wide and unfocused. "Ruin?"

"More insight?" I blinked at her in surprise. Just how much was she getting from me? Time to get gone. I should look into how I can stop that. "You really need to get that looked at. Nine out of ten doctors say peering into the abyss is bad for you. The tenth doctor is a gibbering madman."

"What?" She asked, eyes coming back into focus and looking at me in confusion.

"That was a joke," I sighed. "I'm going back to my vacation now."

"I thought it was funny," Robin said as she walked beside me. The other women were finishing their conversations and disappearing into the shadows of the night as Raven brought them away.

"Pity laughter is worse than no laughter," I pouted at her.

She giggled as she stepped behind a tree and disappeared.

"Mikael?" Artoria asked, a bit hesitantly. She and Diana were eyeing me, a question in

their eyes.

She hadn't added Sir to my name.

"Don't worry," I said, smiling to show I wasn't mad. I really wasn't either. Asking either of them to not be heroes would deny them who they were. I was already happy enough that they had gone along with my whims until now. The pair relaxed. "We'll talk at home. Before that, you have a lot of questions to answer." Their eyes widened as I nodded to the crowd.

A crowd of curious heroes, journalists, and other onlookers. Now that we weren't being subtle, I didn't have to worry about what they would let slip on accident.

"Rejoice!" I said with a smile, my hand folded behind my back as I channelled my best Kirei Kotomine. "You are heroes again!"

I turned, chuckling to myself and stepping towards the shadows myself.

"Elden Lord!" A voice called out from the crowd, but I didn't stop, and he continued to speak hurriedly. "Jimmy Olsen. Daily Planet. What do you intend to-"

"I'll stop you right there. Maybe some other time." I said, not even looking at the man but not speaking harshly. I could respect the balls on the man if nothing else. "I'll have my people call your people."

And with that, I was gone.

Was it petty of me to leave Artoria and Diana to the hyenas after telling them I wasn't mad? Yes, it was.

Did I find it funny? It was fucking hilarious.

Of course, I wasn't laughing when I stepped into Raven's shadow and out the other side.

Instead of emerging in the sun of Australia's outback, I emerged into a room of shadow and mist.

Instead of coming face to face with my big tiddy goth wife, I came face to face with my big tiddy goth wife with four red eyes.

"Finally!" Pride declared with a smirk. "We meet!"

Oh dear.

I was never getting my vacation, was I?

Author's Note:

The first chapter of Furlough and the confrontation with the heroes.

I tried to portray how Mikael's mind works a bit more here, as well as his strengths and weaknesses. I like how things turned out with the heroes.

They were suspicious, rightfully so, but they are also heroes. Good guys. More than a few fanfictions out there either depict heroes as lawful-stupid or plain malevolent. I try to strike a balance between the caution that comes with a dangerous line of work and the goodness/idealism/naivety that comes with being a superhero. It varies from person to person. Iron Man is more suspicious than Captain America. Wonder Woman more than Superman.

My initial plan was something like Mikael's. I would write a verbal confrontation, a back-and-forth like with Strange. But then I got to the girls teasing him, and I had to ask myself: has Mikael done anything wrong?

We, as readers, know he is not a hero and doesn't want to be. The people of this world do not know that. They can only judge him by his actions. And from a purely objective point of view, Mikael has done a lot of good. We know he's stumbled. How he handled Melina's loss wasn't something a hero would do. What happened to Millicent was pretty bad, too. How he twists stories and manipulates people is also very bad. But, from the outside looking in, all they can see is the results.

I had to ask myself: If someone does heroics for selfish reasons, are they still a hero?

I will continue to explore that idea.

Not everything is hunky dory, and we will see more confrontations, but we have a baseline status quo for now.

Let's see how long that lasts.

I'll see you all next Friday.

PS: I forgot to answer this question in the Question Qorner. The height in the souls games are weird. There is no official height. We do know her original body was way larger than her current one. I imagine her around the 5.6 to 5.10 range. We can only stand side by side in Manus Celes and the epilogue. She is a head, head and half, shorter than the tarnished. Mikael is about 6.6. Originally slightly shorter, around the 6-foot mark, as I mentioned at the start of DS3, as he 'levelled up', his body would fill out. He is taller than Robin, the second tallest of the women at 6.2, but shorter than Glynda, who is an absurd 7 feet. RWBY, ladies and gentlemen. The rest of the women vary between Medea's 5.4 and Diana's 6-ish feet. (This varies heavily based on continuity)

This is not counting Priscilla, who is a giant.

FURLOUGH II

I've been reading books of old
The legends and the myths
Achilles and his gold
Hercules and his gifts
Spider-Man's control
And Batman with his fists
And clearly I don't see myself upon that list

"Finally!" Pride declared with a smirk. "We meet!"

When filling out the Catalogue so long ago, I had chosen the former Teen Titan because I honestly admired Raven as a character.

The Raven summoned by the Catalogue to the Mansion had not been a teenager. She had been a version of the superheroine in her mid to late twenties. I only remembered a little of talking with her during her summonings. Most of the conversations I'd had with the women of the Island were lost to the centuries of life. From my impressions, Raven came from a world similar to 'canon'.

If comics had such a thing.

She wasn't a version that assumed ultimate power, became a full-fledged demon, submitted to her father, or even merged with other characters. She was a version of Raven who had been born a half-demon and struggled against her father's influence for her entire life. She had helped found the Teen Titans when the Justice League didn't aid her. From there, she went on to struggle with control of her ever-growing powers, dangerous emotions, and numerous factions seeking to use her for their ends.

She did all this while trying to be a hero.

It is much harder to be a hero when your inner demons are literally demons.

Staring into four red eyes, I knew this was not the woman I was familiar with, though it wore her face.

I took in the changed form of my most reclusive 'wife' with impassive eyes, not letting anything show.

This could be a problem.

"I hadn't known I kept you waiting," I replied impassively, even as I lamented my long-gone wish for a vacation. "Did you talk to my secretary? She should have told you I leave Tuesdays free for any demonic entities. It's not like Tuesdays can get any worse."

"Cute." The way she deadpanned at my words was so much like the Raven I knew that a feeling of uncanniness overcame me.

I realized then what was throwing me off.

It wasn't the four eyes glowing a fiery red.

It wasn't the pointy ears, less elfish like Medea's and more angular like knives.

It wasn't even how her skin was now a light orange rather than the pale grey I was familiar with.

"Your humour hides little from me, Monster," Pride's cruel smile was back. Her four eyes peered up at me as if she could see through my soul by meeting my gaze.

It was that smirk.

That unfamiliar expression on a familiar face.

While I didn't remember much of my conversations with the women while trapped, I had watched them interact for over a year.

That entire time, even when things were at their worst or best, I had never seen the cambion emote more than the slightest twitch in her lips or tightening her eyes. Unlike Ranni's dolls which couldn't emote, Raven's impassivity was derived from an iron-clad control of her emotions.

To see that impassive face twisted in a cruel smirk was disturbing.

Out of all the Family, Raven was the one I spent the most time with since my release. Ever since she had become a Dragon of Shadow, she had only left my side a handful of times, such as when the Family had meals together or when I was getting intimate with someone else. At all other times, she was, quite literally, my shadow.

She was the one I trusted to pull me back when the other 'ordered' me, either by accident or as 'training'.

"Is that anger I feel?" The demon leaned close to me as if to smell me. "No…" she drawled with a teasing grin, meeting my gaze again. "It's fear. How cute."

I snapped my Defences into place.

Before I had gained my Defences, I had never been able to stop Raven's empathy, unlike Emma's telepathy. Since gaining them, I left most of my defences down for the Family as a show of trust. I could pick and choose who could affect me or not through them. If Emma wanted to read my mind, Medea wished to cast a spell on me, or Raven wanted to teleport me, I let them.

The fact that she could sense my emotions gave me critical information. This wasn't a twisted version of this world's Raven. This wasn't a demon of Trigons.

This was MY Raven.

Or at least her body.

This was bad but not unsalvagable.

Now I just needed two more pieces of information, and then I would know what to do.

As a coward, I hated acting without all the info at my fingertips. But, as an egomaniac, I also knew that the proud loved to talk about themselves.

As I stared into those red eyes, I doubted she would be able to stop herself from giving me everything I wanted.

"So, what should I call you?" I asked, my face still impassive.

"I am Pride," she said with… pride. That sounded bad even in my head. But still, that was one piece of the puzzle. This wasn't Trigon speaking through my wife, as he would have bragged about it, but rather a separate being. Just one left. "I am sin. THE Sin. The one from which all others stem." She started to pace around me, a sway to her hips that wanted to draw my eye. I remained fixed, only turning my head to keep her in my vision. "When the morning star fell, it was I who dyed his wings. When Eve stole into the garden and bit the apple, it was I who whispered in her ear."

Was she speaking metaphorically or literally? You could never tell with demons. On the one hand, Raven was less than thirty years old. On the other, Trigon was the closest equivalent of Satan in DC comics barring the Vertigo line of stories. He possibly infused some primordial demon into his offspring to corrupt her and make her more powerful.

"You certainly sound proud of all that." Despite the situation, even though my wife might be possessed by a demon, despite the fact I was trapped alone with a woman who could order me to do literally anything at all, and I wouldn't be able to stop her, I still made the pun.

If there was a hell for dragons of freedom and life, I was going there.

"More humour." She let out a mirthless chuckle, her voice sounding like sex and sin. She continued to circle me, a vulture looking at a tasty morsel. "Your words hide nothing from me, Monster."

She was behind me again, the swish of her cloak audible in the void we stood in.

Pride leaned in, her lips almost to my ear but not touching me.

"I know you," she whispered throatily, her hot breath on my neck. Then she retreated.

I fought not to flinch.

So close, but I had missed my chance.

For a second of frustration, I thought about using my Command Seals. If Pride was in Raven, then she could Order me, but I could do the same to her. I would hate to do it, but I was a coward. My morals came second to my life and freedom, just as they had when I was trapped.

Just because I trusted the Family didn't make me a different person.

As soon as I had the thought, I rejected it.

Not because of the immorality of depriving my wife, even if just her body, of her freedom while we sorted things out.

I dismissed the idea because it wasn't feasible. It was a difference in speed. My chest would glow as I channelled the Seals, and before I could get a word out, Pride would only need to say 'Stop!' and I would lose what opportunities I had.

“I know what lurks behind that facade of kindness, of humour,” Pride continued to circle me as she spoke. “You joke, and you laugh because it is all you can do not to cry. To rage. To scream about the unfairness of it all.”

“I never was good at the whole crying thing,” I said plainly.

“And when the laughter fades?” She asked rhetorically. “What then? The facade of kindness gives way to what you really are. A Monster.”

“You sure are taking your time getting to your point,” I said, getting impatient. I just needed her to get closer.

That was my victory condition before she tired of her own voice and did something that would strip me of my control.

Even if she did end up controlling my body if I could get the others to destroy it so I could recreate my Avatar and have Amy make it human once more. The only problem would be if they could not access this shadow dimension.

Still, I would rather not abandon my body so easily.

I just got it. I’ve barely broken it in.

“I was there,” Pride continued, unmindful of my words, still out of reach. “When I was summoned after you lost Melina to your own cowardice. I felt your rage, your hate. I didn’t need to read your mind to know what you did in those years.”

I said nothing.

“How many did you kill?” She purred, behind me again but not close. “How much pain did you inflict upon the world? What slaughter did you wreak upon those innocent of your suffering? All that emotion, boiling up and consuming the world in your vengeful fire. It must have been exquisite.” The sheer passion and lust in that last word sent shivers down my spine and blood flowing downward.

What can I say? Being scared didn’t mean I couldn’t be aroused. Especially when it was the body of Raven speaking such words.

Just because I had a fear boner didn’t mean I had forgotten my situation, though.

“Uhuh,” I drawled. “And?”

“And I name you my kin,” she declared, finally stopping in front of me, looking triumphant. “Like I, you are a demon hiding in plain sight. An abomination in human flesh. A monster. My monster.”

If the results of my actions could make me a hero, then my actions themselves made me a monster.

In a similar vein to the rest of the Family earlier when they praised me, nothing she had said was technically wrong, and thus I did not deny her words.

She needed a bit of context, though.

My time of greatest slaughter, violence and rage hadn't been in the Lands Between.

That land had already been torn apart by war. Those relatively peaceful lands like Liurnia and Limgrave hadn't felt my wrath. The already destroyed Faram Azula, the battlefields of Mt. Glemnir, and the bloody swamp of Mohg's domain were where most of my pain had been unleashed.

Even the Haligtree, the most 'peaceful' place I had been to while consumed by my pain at the loss of Melina, was home to warriors, beasts, and the rot infected.

Nobody 'innocent' had been caught in my wake.

What I unleashed upon Yharnam, a city of mortals, was so much worse.

But nobody had been around for that. Nobody knew that of a city of over a hundred thousand, less than a hundred had survived to see the sunrise.

When trying to cure cancer, you must tear out all the tumours.

Gehrman had told me a hunter must hunt, and I had heeded his words.

I hunted.

Everything.

In opposition to Djura, who sought to preserve the lives of the beasts in hopes of a cure, I had granted every inhabitant the release of death. I slaughtered my way through the beast plagued, the clerics who spread Blood Ministration, and the scholars who had discovered the Blood.

By the end of the hunt, I had set up a small refugee camp for the non-infected and sane in the forests surrounding Yharnam and burned the rest.

Nothing but ashes remained of the Healing Church, Byrgenworth, or the city itself.

From there, I entered the Chalice dungeons from which it all began. I continued my slaughter downwards, collapsing the structures above me. I would have been entombed there with the remnants of Pthumeru had it not been for my connection to the Hunter's Dream.

If the world ever managed to reach deep enough to the parts of the chalice dungeons I didn't get to, it would be once they had enough technology to reach close to the center of the earth.

Until then, that world was safe from curious scholars trying to elevate humanity at the cost of sanity.

If future generations of that world ever learned of my actions on that night that lasted months, they might call me a hero. They would be able to see that my actions had prevented a plague that could have drowned the world in a tide of corrupted blood and beasts.

To the survivors of Yharnam?

I was the monster in the dark, their worst nightmare made flesh.

A blood-drunk hunter that had carved his way through the bodies of their neighbours and friends. I hadn't cared that a good portion of those I killed had been people lashing out in fear,

cruel acts driven by their horrific situation.

Any who took up blade, claw, or fang against me was mercilessly put down.

To a little girl and her older sister, huddled together in a camp I had built for the few innocents I had managed to save, I must have looked like a monster covered in the blood of a city.

I didn't even have the loss of Melina as an excuse. Her death had been over a decade before.

It had been my rage at the situation, enjoyment of combat, and desire to be free, all channelled into ensuring a 'happy end' for a world infected by beings from beyond time and space.

I had channelled my fear of letting Emma into my mind into a heroic result of a monstrous act.

Two sides, the same coin.

A hero and a monster.

I was neither and both.

I was just me.

That was what it meant to be human.

"You're right." Pride knew nothing of my thoughts or of the context she lacked. She didn't know that I felt much more comfortable being called a monster than a hero. Damnation and blasphemy were more familiar than praise and adulation.

All she saw was me nodding my head in agreement.

"Then join me!" She said in triumph, stepping even closer.

Finally, close enough.

"Join me, and we can-"

Her words were cut off as I leaned in and kissed her.

Four red eyes widened as our lips met.

I don't know if she sensed the power of my touch. None of the others reported feeling anything when I Freed them of an outside influence.

I expected four red eyes to become two dark ones. For her ears to return to human shape and her skin to return to its pale hue. I was the prince charming to her sleeping beauty.

I Freed Raven of all negative influences, all possessions and all corruption.

Trigon could hold no influence with her while she touched me.

Nothing changed.

The last piece slid into place.

"Why would I join you?" I asked as I pulled away from her lips with a smile. Pride's four red eyes looked up at me in confusion. "When you are already Mine."

A member of my Family was a tad more evil than I expected? Or at least had an aspect of herself that was?

So what?

"How-"

This time when I kissed the demonic sin that lived in my wife and pulled her close, I channelled not my Element but Sticky Fingers. My hands ghosted over her body, learning exactly what to touch by the way she shivered under my touch.

I wondered briefly what sort of face one of the seven deadly sins would make if I drove her into a pleasurable mess.

I was looking forward to finding out.

As she melted into my touch, demonic red eyes closing in pleasure, my eyes scanned the darkness of this shadow dimension.

My eyes found a patch of black, slightly darker than the rest, and I remained focused on it even as my tongue intertwined with that of the demon.

Raven, the pale-skinned woman I was familiar with, stepped from the shadow. Her eyes were locked on mine, a tiny upturn of her lips the only indication of her satisfaction with the result of the situation she had set up.

I rolled my eyes at her, then focused on introducing Pride to lust.

Let's see if I can corrupt a demon.

******

"Welcome home," I called out from the couch, turning my eyes from my book towards the doorway.

Priscilla, whose floofy tail I had been resting my head on, didn't look away from her game, but she did raise a hand in greeting.

Medea, the cat/dragon, didn't even stir from her position as a bread loaf on my chest.

Sometimes I really wondered if housecats were the most successful hunters of the animal kingdom.

Artoria and Diana took in my decadent image, drowning in fluff, with surprise.

"You did not return to Australia?" The king of knights asked as they entered the room, careful not to impede Priscilla's view.

Floofy dragon she might be, but nobody wanted her to pout at them because she lost a ranked match.

"Change of plans," I shrugged. In protest of my movement, Priscilla's tail tickled my nose. "There were many of those today," I said, ignoring the offending appendage.

They winced.

I sighed.

“I’m not mad,” I repeated my earlier statement as I sat up. Medea somehow managed to remain asleep and attached to my chest even though she was now at a ninety-degree angle. “But we do need to talk.”

“Where is everyone? Shall I call them?” Diana asked as she took a seat on one of the armchairs.

“The rest are still touring the land down under,” I explained. “I’ll join them later for the show. This is a good time for Ranni and Melina to spend time with the rest of the Family without me around. And I needed to talk to you two, not them anyway.”

“Then I shall see to the children and give thee thy privacy,” Priscilla said as she won her match and stood. She pried Medea from my chest, the cat finally waking up to see what had disturbed her, saw the crossbreed, and went back to sleep.

It was a good thing this damn cat was so cute.

“Before anything else,” I said once the hybrid had left the room. “How did things go?”

“It went well,” Artoria said from her own seat. We weren’t far apart, but there was an awkward shuffling to their movements. I fought the urge to sigh again. This was coming out all wrong. “They had many questions.”

“I would too if a gender-bent King Arthur and extradimensional twin showed up out of nowhere,” I said with a smile, trying to ease their tension.

“I answered what I could,” Diana elaborated. “I tried to steer clear of anything about the Family, focusing more on my own experiences in my homeworld. They had questions about Doomsday and other villains, as well as their counterparts from my dimension. I could only answer some of them due to being unfamiliar with Emma’s world and the novel. They were still on guard, but I believe we will be able to work together without issue.”

“That’s good. And your counterpart? How are you handling it?”

“This is not the first time I’ve dealt with other versions of myself,” Wonder Woman said with a chuckle. “Separate timelines, other dimensions, evil clones, and even myself from the future. There are few situations I have yet to encounter before. This version of myself is less experienced than I am and still needs to learn how to deal with these situations. Especially given our… relationship.”

“Will she be a problem?” I asked, brow furrowed in worry. As it was, this worlds Diana was already gaining Insight from being close to me, and I had no way to stop it.

“Not likely,” Diana shook her head. “We are meeting her tomorrow for brunch, then she will show us to the Hall of Justice. It is quite late on this side of the world, so they

would like to reconvene with their other members in the morning."

"Have fun," I said with a smirk. Likely this world's Batman would be there, as well as others that hadn't been able to fight Doomsday, and they would be bombarded by a bunch of questions. "How about you, Artoria? Anything of interest?"

"It seems all those who bear the name Myrrdin are cursed to cause me trouble," she said with the smallest of frowns. "While this version is less of a pervert than my court mage, he inundated me with questions and would not let me talk to the other heroes until I had signed almost every part of his costume. Then he proceeded to inquire about my relationship with you. Repeatedly."

I snorted out a laugh, which caused the blonde to pout at me.

"He's a fanboy," I said with a giggle. Even Diana was smiling at her friend behind a hand. "I bet he has every single movie about you and your knights ever produced. Next time you see him, he'll be carrying around a bunch of paraphernalia for you to sign. He'll build a shrine out of everything you ever touch. He'll attack me on sight for daring to sully the king." I pantomimed, holding up an epee as if challenging someone to a duel. "To defend your honour!"

"What?" Artoria looked repulsed by my words. She was used to the crowd's adulation, being king and all, but she was wholly unprepared for modern fan culture.

Then I understood the ramifications of our situation, and my laughter died.

"There's going to be merchandise," I said with my eyes wide in realization. "Now that we are a known quantity to the world, and they know we aren't going around killing everyone or something, there's going to be a bunch of merchandise about us. Shirts. Toys. Plushies. Body Pillows." With every word that left my mouth, I felt the horror rise.

Maybe there was still time to destroy the earth?

"The fans can be insistent," Diana nodded, unbothered by my words. "A few creations can be of good quality, but sometimes they go too far. The League left such matters to Bruce, who ensured things did not go out of control and channelled the funds back to us to fund our operations."

"Oh god," I whispered, still staring at nothing. "There's going to be panties with my face on them, isn't there?"

"Mikael plushies?" Artoria murmured to herself, eyes as vacant as my own but for entirely different reasons.

Oi! Can't you see this is a serious situation, woman! This is the end of the world as we know it!

"I need to talk with Emma later," I said with determination. "Like all evil, we must smother it in the cradle before it can grow out of control and destroy our lives."

“You are exaggerating,” Diana huffed with a roll of her eyes.

“You say that now, but I bet you’ll be singing a different tune once there are Pricilla-shaped sex dolls on the market,” I insisted.

“We cannot allow even one to exist!” Artoria declared imperiously, and Diana nodded just as seriously.

We would not allow the corruption of capitalism to taint our wholesome floof!

As a dyed-in-the-wool capitalist myself, I understood the appeal of the mountains of money one could gain from the truth of ‘cute is justice’.

But not with my cinnamon roll of a dragon!

“Anyway,” I shook my head, clearing my thoughts on purging the world of its sin and returning to the actual topic. “Anything else?”

“Nothing of import today,” the knightess shook her head. “As I said, Myrrdin occupied most of my time. The only thing to note was that they know I am not from this dimension.”

“Eh,” I shrugged, uncaring. “Going forward, they should assume we are all not native to this reality. It’s what I would do when I realized Diana existed. I expect they’ll piece together who Raven is pretty easily after what happened with Strange. I would ask you not to bring her up for at least a week if you can help it.”

“How come?” Artoria asked.

“She asked me to do something for her,” I shrugged. “It isn’t that big a deal, though do let the heroes know when you see them tomorrow that Scathach, Glynda and I will be spending the next few days in San Fransico and will probably spend some time with the PRT East by Southeast team.”

“To what end?”

“The former Teen Titans that make up that team include Raven’s native counterpart,” I explained. “Raven asked me for a favour regarding her younger self, and I promised Scathach a fun time, so I am killing a few birds with one stone.”

“What sort of ‘fun time’?” Diana asked warily, well aware of the Celt’s preferences.

Nothing the scarlet-haired woman enjoyed could be considered ‘family friendly’.

“Nothing that bad,” I rolled my eyes. “She and Glynda will mostly be there for cover. We’ll use her desire to find ‘students’ as an excuse.”

“You wish us to lie to the league?” Diana asked with a slight frown at the idea.

“It won’t be a lie,” I explained. “We will be training them, so long as they accept. Which they will, if only to spy on us. Nightwing, the leader of that team, is even one of those Scathach was interested in testing before Raven even asked me for the favour. Technically the truth is the best kind of truth.”

“What is the favour? And how dangerous will it be?” Artoria asked.

“Slightly dangerous, only not really,” I said, shaking my hand back and forth in a ‘so-so’ gesture. “Strictly speaking, it only needs Raven and me. Glynda and Scathach are honestly overkill. We are just protecting her younger self through a difficult time. I can summon any six of you at a moment’s notice if anything goes wrong using the seals. I might do so anyway, if only because I think overkill is underrated.”

“If you are certain, we will do as you requested,” Artoria nodded. “I urge you to call for us if things look dire.”

“Since I have been Free, when have I tried to do anything on my own? Or with anything less than the utmost caution. Unlike you two.” I sighed, finally getting to the main subject. “I have to ask; what were you two thinking?” The words came out harsher than I intended. Judging by the pair’s narrowed eyes, they hadn’t taken it the best either.

“What do you mean?” Diana asked.

“Just that,” I said more softly, not wanting this to become an argument. “I am trying to understand your thought process. A few weeks ago, I said I would support you all. I stand by that, even if you want to be heroes again. But I also asked you to communicate if you were going to do things that might negatively affect the Family. So I am trying to understand why you did the things you did? Walk me through your thought process.”

“We were having lunch when we were alerted to Doomsday’s approach,” Artoria recounted. “Its last revival was caught on camera, and Diana was aware of its abilities from her home world. Since we feared causing too much destruction, we opted to use your armoury rather than transform or unleash Rhongomyniad. Medea has told me before of the nature of your weapons, and we hoped one of them would lay the beast to rest for good.”

“There!” I exclaimed as I pointed at the blonde. Both women half jumped at my interjection. “That right there is what I don’t get. I understand not wanting Priscilla involved. I didn’t, either. I understand trying to use my weapons and have no problem if you’re going to borrow them. In the end, one of them did work, even if it wasn’t one I left behind. What I don’t understand is why you didn’t ask me which weapons could work. Even if Emma couldn’t reach me on the other side of the planet, a simple text message or call could do the trick.”

“There was no time,” Diana explained with a frown. “As far as we were aware, you were engaged with other heroes and would not have answered if we did try to reach you. We could not wait for that when every second could be a life lost.”

“So you thought the best idea was to rush in and hit it till it died? What were you going to do when none of those weapons worked” I asked rhetorically. When they looked

about to interject, I plowed on. “How long was it between realizing Doomsday was near and engaging him? A minute? Two?”

“A few minutes,” Artoria interjected. “I summoned Dun Stallion, returned home to grab your armoury and back.”

“We are not stupid, Mikael,” Diana was annoyed at my questioning. I could tell. “Should nothing have worked, we would have transformed and turned Doomsday to dust.”

Tough.

Just as I needed to understand them, they needed to understand me.

That was the only way this Family would survive in worlds where multiverse-level destruction is common.

“Then why didn’t you do that right away?” I asked. “You grab him, and Artoria blasts him. A bit flashy, sure, but it would have worked.”

“You were the one who asked us to remain discreet!” Diana responded, pointing at me accusingly.

The conversation was getting heated despite my intent.

Even Artoria was now looking at me in displeasure, my words appearing more accusational than I intended.

They just weren’t getting it.

“I like secrecy because it keeps us safe! If it comes down to keeping a secret and risking your lives or becoming the flashiest bastard on the planet, I would prefer the latter. None of that changes the fact you didn’t even try to ask us for help. We all could have come up with a plan together.”

“You would have us wait?” Artoria asked, incredulous. “While people died, you would have us stand back and cower until we have a plan?”

“Yes!”

The pair recoiled from my shout as if struck, surprised at my vehemence and tone.

Then the surprise was gone and in their eyes was disappointment.

I was surprised by how much that look hurt.

We were in a fortunate position where there was nothing we couldn’t run away from by moving to another universe. We did not have a home we needed to worry about. All we needed to worry about was the people of that home. They needed to understand that.

“Mikael-” Artoria started to say, the title gone from in front of my name.

I cut her off, willing them to understand where I was coming from.

“You fought Doomsday for a minute and had a hole torn through you. You would have died if it weren’t for Avalon.” I said to Artoria before turning to Diana. “You fought him with Aura, your Semblance, and Haki. All abilities you never had in your home world

on top of weapons made from the souls of gods. And you were still losing. Putting up a good fight, sure, but losing. We won without sacrificing a good portion of the USA as collateral damage because the rest of us were sitting back and planning contingencies. What would have happened if we weren't there? If I hadn't been curious about why the Flash ran off? We took a gamble with the Godslaying Blade, and it could have easily failed."

"We still would have slayed the beast!" Artoria insisted, standing up from her seat and looking into my eyes.

When had I stood up?

"How would you act if one of your Knights tried to fight Vortigern with a weapon they weren't sure would work?" I asked. "Or someone attacked Apokolips on a whim? These are not actions we can take without ensuring our safety."

"Your concern is warranted," Diana acknowledged steadily, rising from her own chair. "However, we do not always have the luxury of a plan, of time. We had knowledge from my world, as well as footage from this one. We acted based on what we knew. Was it the perfect plan? No. But it was one built on solid foundations. Quick action can be the difference between life and death for the innocent."

"Then let them die!" I snarled.

When they recoiled this time, the disappointment was even more pronounced. Despite how much that hurt to look at, the other emotion I saw there was so much worse.

Fear.

Looking down, I saw why.

My human form, so dearly gained, was starting to unravel. Fin-like blades poked from skin that felt too tight on me. Blood welled up from the wounds, ruining my clothes. My limbs felt bound like I was wearing a shirt with no sleeves.

The human mask I wore was slipping away from my desire for them to understand my fear and concern for them.

Pride had not been wrong to call me a monster.

She just didn't know what kind I was.

I could shed this fragile shell and assume my real form with but a flex of my will.

I resisted the urge, calling upon the memories to refocus on what made me who I was.

My body returned to its standard form. The holes in my flesh healed in a moment as my magic went to work repairing my form. I would still need to clean up a bit before meeting the others, but I no longer looked like an eldritch abomination stuffed into a meat suit six sizes too small.

I sagged back onto the couch, suddenly feeling drained.

So much had happened so quickly that I was surprised that it was only a few hours ago that we were all having a meal together before we went to confront the heroes on the outskirts of Sydney.

Man, nothing went to plan today.

“If it ever came to it, I would rather you left people to die rather than risk your life,” I said softly. I rubbed my eyes tiredly, not looking at them.

I didn’t want to know what their eyes looked like right now.

“You know we cannot do that,” Diana said just as softly, but there was no mistaking the conviction and her tone. There would be no changing their mind, I knew. “Even if we die, did you not purchase an ability to bring us back? Warranty, I believe?”

“The Company already screwed me over,” I responded, still rubbing my eyes. “I am not going to entrust any of our lives to them. There are beings here that destroy souls, so I wouldn’t even be able to use my abilities from Death to bring you back. We cannot act like we are immortal. Too many heroes and villains die because they are overconfident. I am powerful, possibly the strongest on this planet, but I am nowhere near some of the beings in this universe, let alone the multiverse we will explore.

Even if I had proof the Warranty worked, which I don’t, I still wouldn’t want to risk any of your lives. It doesn’t matter if I see it work a billion times. It only needs to fail once for me to lose you forever. Even if everything worked perfectly, there would still be three days of worry where I wouldn’t know if you were coming back. I would much rather destroy a world than go through that.”

“Is that what this is truly about, Sir Mikael?” Artoria asked. “I know you. You are not the type of man who would leave the innocent to suffer if you could do anything about it.”

“That is just it,” I said, finally opening my eyes and meeting theirs. Green flicked with gold, and dark blue looked at me with concern, and my gut twisted. “If I can do anything about it is the key. I have two rules I stick to whenever I want to do anything heroic. How does it inconvenience me? What do I get out of it? Everything falls into those two categories. Even if I only get satisfaction, sometimes that is worth more than the inconvenience. I don’t mind a risk if the rewards are proportional. Call me selfish if you wish, but nothing is worth risking any of you.”

“I do not think that is selfish,” Diana disagreed as she sat beside me on the couch. “One does not need to be a hero to be a good man.”

“Did I ever tell you why I hate being called a hero?” I asked, trying one final tactic.

“Not to me,” Artoria said, and Wonder Woman shook her head.

“It’s because heroes do not get happy endings.”

I could see them contemplate my words, trying to parse the implications.

“How many heroes do you know that retired?” I asked Diana, trying to get them to understand where this was all coming from.

“There have been a few,” she nodded. “It was rare, but a few hung up their costume.”

“And of those rare few, how many actually stayed retired? How many died happy, surrounded by their family and friends?” I could see how she struggled to think of an example. “How many tried to retire only to be pulled back in by the next crisis? Or an old enemy? How many died from a life they could not leave behind? From a conscience that would not let them ignore a fight, they couldn’t win in the name of the ‘innocent’?”

“Too many,” Diana nodded gravely, finally understanding where I was coming from.

“Even if we ignore superheroes and villains,” I turned to Artoria now, trying to put things from her own perspective. “If we look at heroes in the classic sense, the picture gets even worse. In the Throne of Heroes, a record of heroes from the past and the future, how many died happy deaths?”

“Some, but they were one in a million.”

“And how many of them buried friends and family that were taken because of their heroism.”

Neither said anything.

No hero hadn’t tasted tragedy.

Even though they agreed with me and understood my fear and concern, I could see that my words would not dissuade them. The odds were against them ever finding happiness.

A hero never knows peace. A hero gives and gives and gives and gives.

Eventually, they have nothing left to give.

“You know that we cannot stop,” Diana said softly, intertwining her fingers with mine. “We would not be able to forgive ourselves if we did, and we would not be the women you fell in love with either.”

Despite all that, they would continue to do what they thought was right.

That is what it means to be a hero.

I sincerely admire people like that.

I could never be a hero.

“I wasn’t trying to get you to stop,” I said, rubbing my thumb against the back of her hand. “I just want you guys to understand the risks. Understand that I can never be a hero.”

“What of those you aided during your travels?” Artoria asked, sitting on my other side. “Emma has told us what you did to help the natives of those lands. Those were not the actions of a selfish man.”

“The inconvenience was worth the satisfaction of getting them their happy ending,” I shrugged my shoulders. “All it cost me was time, which I had in an infinite supply, and a bit of pain. No great cost. If I had thought that helping them would cause me to go hollow or prevent me from escaping, I would not have done so. It is easy to be generous when you are rich.”

“But it isn’t,” Diana shook her head. “Just because one is wealthy does not mean they will share with those less fortunate. I have seen billionaires spare not a cent for a begar. You help when you can. That is more than most.”

“You care,” Artoria emphasized. “For us. For the Family. For a cat you could have left behind. For people you could have ignored but chose to help anyway. For worlds that were not your own. When I call you Sir Mikael and say I would welcome you as one of my finest Knights, it is not because you are a hero. It is not because of your strength of arms. It is your humanity. After all you have gone through, all the suffering, hardship and loss, you retained your humanity. You still care.”

“What this family needs is not another hero,” Diana continued. “We do not need a dragon, a god, or even a leader. What we need is someone who cares. Someone we can turn to for aid. Someone we can lean on and who will hold us when we come home. We did not fall in love with Mikael the Dragon. Or the Elden Lord. I fell in love with a man. A flawed, scared but good man.”

“Trust us to be heroes. Trust us to come home to you,” Artoria finally said. “And we will trust you to fight for our happy ending.”

“Then work with me,” I hated how much my words sounded like a plea. “No more going off half-cocked. You don’t need to call me every two-bit burglar, but if you think there is even a little threat to your lives, I want you to call me.”

“I can agree to communicate more, but that seems excessive,” Diana frowned.

“It isn’t,” I denied plainly. “Don’t get me wrong. You two can take care of yourselves. You can kick my ass up and down the Island all day, and all I can do to stop it is blow up the Island itself. It is precisely that reason I want you to call me. If I can’t help you, then I’ll be able to summon someone who can. Even if all I can do is channel my power to you, anybody who can threaten you is someone we should face as a family.”

“Very well,” Artoria nodded. “Even if only for your peace of mind, I can promise to try and reach out if I feel at risk. I might only sometimes be able to, depending on the circumstance, but I shall make an attempt.” Diana nodded as well, though a bit more begrudgingly.

“Good,” I said with finality as I stood up. The conversation hadn’t gone as planned, just like everything else today, but that promise was the main thing I wanted out of this

conversation. If they were going to be heroes, I needed to minimize what risks I could and being informed as fast as possible was the best way to do that. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need a shower and a change. I have a hot date with the rest of the family, and I’m sure you two have your own plans.”

I left them to talk in that living room.

I didn’t find the situation ideal, but we were at a point where I could live with it.

If I ever found out they didn’t call me or were truly at risk, I would summon them away from danger.

Innocent lives or other heroes be damned.

I wasn’t losing anyone ever again.

Author's Note:

A bit of plot, a bit of intrigue, and a lot of characterization.
We'll be seeing more about Raven in the coming chapters, but my main focus for this one was Artoria and Diana. I really wanted to explore this aspect of their characters and how it conflicts with Mikael's.

It is easy to forget when we read stories about them, but heroes generally do not lead happy lives. We might see the power, the fame, the fortune, but most heroes are intertwined with tragedy, whether Superhero or Mythological.

Mikael, always searching for his happily ever after, does not want that.

The other women are more pragmatic, still willing to die for their beliefs (Scathach in the USA singularity, Emma Frost in some comics, Tsunade and Robin for those they care about, etc…), but Artoria and Diana are the only two who are 'heroes' in the sense of sacrificing their lives for bystanders.

Mikael definty doesn't want that.

From characters rises conflict.

I'll see you all next week.

Ps: I did get Glynda's height wrong. I was basing it off early RWBY when we didn't have the wiki. I'll correct that in the older chapters when I update them at the end of Volume 2. I'll use her accurate height going forward (she is still the tallest woman summoned baring Priscilla, so it isn't a fundamental change)

FURLOUGH III

Looking for something
We can rely on
There's gotta be something better out there
Love and compassion
Their day is coming
All else are castles built in the air
And I wonder when we are ever gonna change
Living under the fear 'til nothing else remains
All the children say
We don't need another hero
We don't need to know the way home
All we want is life beyond
The Thunderdome

"How did you know?" Raven asked in her familiar monotone, even as I made out with her inner demon.

"I'm honestly embarrassed how long it took me to realize what was going on," I admitted as I pulled away from Pride.

"Mmmmggg."

Not before lighting up every one of her nerve endings with pleasure.

My Life Element and Sticky Fingers synergized to give me a few tricks that most others lacked. Something like this, commanding an orgasm at will, wasn't something I did lightly as it had left even Artoria half-mad with pleasure and too over-sensitive to continue. Combine it with my inexhaustible trait, and I could provide infinite pleasure with just a touch.

When I had told Medea I could mind-break Aphrodite, I hadn't been exaggerating. With the ability to provide pleasure or pain directly and Sticky Fingers' instinctual knowledge of body language, it wasn't a question of if but when someone would give in to my touch.

Was it petty of me to do that to poor Pride because she had given me a scare?

Yes. Yes, it was.

"If I were her," I continued even as I held Pride's shuddering body close to me. "The first words out of my mouth would have been something like, 'stay still and don't do anything'. The fact that a demon, especially one with as much pride as her, did not try and lord her control over me should have been all I needed to know. It wasn't that she didn't want to. It was that she couldn't. Not without her Orders being rescinded."

"Then what tipped you off?"

"She could sense my emotions, so she had to be you, or at least a part of you. You would

have been freed when we kissed if it was a possession. Then I remembered how emotive you are when in my shadow."

I looked around the pitch-black space we were in, noting how some parts seemed darker than others now that I had time to get a good look.

"This is your inner world, right?" I asked. "That's why you stay in shadow dragon form all the time. You can be in your inner world while still retaining control and using your powers in the outer world?"

"It is not," she shook her head slightly. Pride started to stir in my arms. "Are you familiar with Jungian psychology? Emotions, personas, masks, shadows. By embracing my Element, I can seperate myself from them all and let them loose while retaining control of my powers. But we are still connected. Separate yet connected. One individual, yet distinct. The control I have always wanted. It also allows us to multi-task and watch over multiple members of the Family."

"Same difference," I rolled my eyes at the correction. "Besides, Freudian and Jungian psychology has largely been disproven." Raven simply raised an eyebrow before looking at the demon in my arms. "Fair enough, you are a special case. If this is Pride, your demonic side, where are the others? I assume it's more than just you two?"

"You are mine!" Pride snarled, finally cognizant again and shaking off my hands to stand on her own. She grabbed my shirt, tugging me down to look at her. I'm sure it was a coincidence that it also allowed her to steady her still-wobbly legs. "Love, Knowledge, Happiness, and the others can only have you when I am done! You. Are. Mine!"

"Sure, sure," I patted her on the head gently. Angry/possessive Raven was so cute. While I did, I looked at the Raven I was more familiar with for more clarification.

"Pride isn't an emotional persona," Raven explained simply. "She is the manifestation of our Demonic side. All of it. She wanted to talk to you first, get you on her side. She's the one who pulled you in while you were travelling. I thought it was a dumb idea to leave her alone. Here we are."

"Hey!"

"So, what does she want?" I asked, still ignoring the growling demoness. Her face was red again, though it wasn't from arousal this time. Her temper was about to erupt, but I wanted to pinch those cheeks.

Her face too.

"She has this hair-brained idea to-" Raven's words were cut off by Mt. Pride blowing up.

"Stop ignoring me!"

Compelled by her Order, I focused on Pride with my complete attention.

"Oh?" I asked softly. "Go on. What were you going to say?"

For some reason, both women took a step away from me.

“You are free,” a tiny voice said from my shoulder.

Turning slightly and looking down, I saw a tiny Raven, wearing a pink cloak, waiving up at me with a big smile on her lips.

“Hi,” she chirped before standing on her tiptoes to peck me on the chin.

Then she was gone in a swirl of pink cloth.

“I’m guessing that was Happiness?” I asked rhetorically to Raven, who nodded. Turning to Pride, I met her still wide eyes.

I sighed.

I had no one to blame except myself, but seriously, my big-tiddy-goth-demon-wife cannot be this cute.

“Sorry. I took the teasing too far. Can you forgive me?” I spoke kindly.

“Of- of course,” she stuttered, recovering as her eyes narrowed at me. “So long as you recognize your fault, I can allow MY monster some leeway.”

“That is very gracious of you,” I said seriously, fighting to keep the smile off my face. “Now, what were you going to say?”

“You are aware today is the 25th of October.” It was a statement, not a question. With her pride appropriately acknowledged, the demon was more than happy to exposit. I didn’t point out it was the 26th in Australia. Where I was supposed to be. “Our birthday is on the 30th.”

“I am aware,” I nodded, haven taken the time to note down any important dates for the women. The basics of being a husband is remembering birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries. It was easy since I just wrote them into my phone. “I was planning on spending the day with you. Making a day of it, you know. I think I have a good gift idea, too.”

“You don’t need to,” Raven said, her pale cheeks flushed. Even if her voice was the same calm intonation as always, she was way more expressive in this shadow world.

She might have more control now, but she was still the same woman. It was honestly sad that the mere act of remembering her birthday was enough to make her this embarrassed.

“He needs to!” Pride declared, contradicting herself and holding out her hand as if I would be carrying her gift for her right now.

I met her eyes and raised a brow.

She lowered her hand and continued on shamelessly.

“My date of birth holds significance to not only myself but the world as a whole. I was created as a portal for Trigon to invade other dimensions.” I nodded, aware of the prophecy about her birth from comics and TV shows. “In my home world, we repelled him, and the prophecy went unfulfilled. He tried various other means to encroach upon the earth, but through our efforts, he never got as close as he did to victory as our eighteenth birthday.”

“Sure,” I said, indicating I was following along.

“It is nearing our birthday, and Trigon approaches once more.” Pride declared, looking triumphant.

“For you? Or for the local Raven?” I asked. Depending on the answer, I could take two very different responses. If it was the Raven in front of me, I could bring her to space and go ‘Nom Nom’. Trigon might be DC Satan, but I can take him with the rest of the Family so long as I wasn’t in his dimension, the seat of his power. “I thought she was too old. She’s part of the Protectorate. When I checked up on her, she was a bit younger than you but still older than eighteen. Didn’t Trigon already try and take her over?”

“What you might not be aware of,” Raven explained for Pride, “Is that it wasn’t the exact birthday that was important but when I reached ‘adulthood’. Like Diana, I have experience with other versions of myself, and sometimes that age varies. In my home, it was eighteen. In others, sixteen. In this one, it is twenty-one. This year.”

“How can you tell?”

“We can sense him,” Pride said. “He holds no sway over us, but we are still familiar with his power. His influence. We, too, investigated our local equivalent, and she reeks of his power. She has five days before he tears a hole in reality through her and consumes this world as he has so many others.”

“If Dr. Fate, the Sorcerer Supreme, or any dozen other powerful heroes do not stop him,” I pointed out. “His track record isn’t the best. We alert them, they fight, and we eat popcorn. Or better yet, you teleport me to San Fransisco, I poke local Raven, Free her of his influence, and we all go get tacos.”

“No.” Raven shook her head, though I saw an upward lip curve.

“No tacos?” I asked.

“No stopping him.” Pride clarified with a malicious smirk. “We are going to let him invade. In fact, we are going to make sure he succeeds.”

******

“Do you have a moment to talk?” Diana asked softly, knocking gently on the doorframe to announce her presence.

“I can talk while I work,” Medea said, not pausing from her sowing and only looking up briefly. “What can I help you with this early in the morning?”

Strictly speaking, none of those bound needed sleep thanks to the benefits of the Catalogue. It helped with all the international travel they did, lowering the problems with jet lag or time zone problems. Most still took the chance for rest when night fell, but it wasn’t rare for one or more of them to pass multiple days without returning to their

rooms.

Medea was the most egregious offender, often staying up for over a week with her various projects and hobbies or locking herself in her workshop when inspiration took her.

Diana, on the other hand, liked her sleep.

She rose pretty early, usually around sunrise, but her long habit of getting sleep when she could as a heroine had carried over even after a year on the Island.

Which made this meeting, right before the sun rose and only half an hour after the witch had returned from Australia, a bit of an odd occurrence.

“What are you working on?” Diana asked rather than explain her presence.

“Hm? Oh, I am working on a dress for Ranni. She was looking for something more modern than her robes and liked what I had made for the others. Hehehehe, she’s like Artoria. All stoic and placid. I can’t wait to see her in this. Hehehehe.”

For a moment, Diana appreciated the surrealness of the situation.

Here was Medea, Witch of Betrayal and niece to Circe, one of her most dangerous foes, giggling perversely while weaving a dress for another woman. A goddess who they both shared a husband with.

The reminder of Mikael shook Diana from her thoughts.

“I take it that your evening went well then?”

“It was wonderful,” Medea sighed wistfully, pausing in her work to stare off into space in reminiscence. “The play was great, a modern comedy, but once it was over, he took us dancing. I had no idea modern dances could be so… intimate. It was magical.” Medea paused in silence for a long second before shaking her head and returning to work with a rueful chuckle. “It seems Mikael’s bad humour is contagious. Anyway, a few people recognized us after the whole thing with Doomsday, but the news hadn’t completely spread since it hadn’t even been a day. We got some odd looks, as was to be expected with our large group, but went largely unbothered. It will be a long time before we can do something like that again without disguises or spells.”

“Sorry.” The amazon apologized more for the inconvenience than genuine regret. She still stood by her actions in saving the local heroes, but she was sorry about the problems it was causing the others.

“Don’t worry about it,” her fellow greek shook her head. “Our images were already out there, and we planned to meet the heroes today anyway. All you did was change the venue and circumstances. But I doubt you are here to make small talk about our date. So, I’ll ask again, what can I do for you, Diana?”

“It is about Mikael,” Wonder Woman explained. “We had an argument. One that is bothering me, and I am not sure why.”

And so the amazon explained the situation of her and Artoria's decision to help the heroes, their talk with Mikael upon returning and the argument that followed. She carefully tried to explain his words as precisely as she remembered them as well as their side.

"What do you want me to say?" Medea asked once Diana had finished, setting aside her work and giving the amazon her full attention. "I agree with him. You two should have contacted us."

"That is not the issue I am facing. Looking back, I can agree we were too hasty and going forward, I have no problem asking for help or being careful. It is just…" Diana paused, struggling to put her feelings into words. "I don't know. Something about that conversation is bothering me. Artoria isn't used to being the one that asks for help. That is where her issue resides. She was always the one whom people turned to. She was always the King. It will be a while before she reconciles having others as strong or stronger than her on which to rely. She will get used to it, but it will take time."

"Makes sense. As much as I love that woman, she can be very prideful. Just like her lion. Most of the time, it's cute."

"But I have worked with teams before." Diana continued, getting to the heart of her problem. "I have called for help when over my head. I can even admit that Mikael was right to chastise us. But something is still bugging me. I do not know why his words were so… disheartening to hear."

"And you came to me?" Medea raised an eyebrow in question.

"You are the one who knows Mikael best." One raised eyebrow became two. "Even if we disregard the fact he named his cat after you and that you both share a love of magic, you both were in similar situations with regards to relationship and mindset."

"I don't think anyone's ever been in the same relationship we are now," Medea giggled.

"Maybe not the exact same," Diana had to concede that point. "But you cannot deny the similarities in both of your approaches. Caution, preparation, planning, and even manipulation. You think like him, though I hope you don't take offence when I say he is the more heroic of you two." Medea nodded in agreement, conceding her own less-than-stellar moral compass. "Besides, Artoria speaks well of the advice you have provided her regarding her relationship with him. I was hoping your input could shed some light on what about that argument has kept me up all night."

"I don't think I should be playing love doctor, given my own past," Medea said with a wry smile. "Still, I can try and help. You said it wasn't his request for you all to call for help that was the problem? Was it his willingness to let others die?"

“No,” Diana shook her head. “Or at least, I don’t think so. While I would not have put it so bluntly as he did, there have been times when I have had to make hard choices in my career. Sacrifice the few to save the many. I also don’t believe that preferring to keep one’s family safe over strangers is a problem, either. It is not what a hero would do, but, as he often stresses, Mikael is not a hero. I also don’t expect him to be. Nor am I so suicidal that I will sacrifice my life for a conflict with no benefit, even if I can return with Warranty.”

“So it is not his request to call for help. Not his choice of family over heroics. Nor is it his concern for your self-sacrificial nature.” Medea counted off the various possibilities on her fingers. “I’ll be honest, besides those points, I don’t know what else you could be having a problem with.”

“I don’t either. That is what is bugging me. If I knew what the problem was, I could address it.” Wonder Woman wasn’t one for dramatics. More often than not, acting as a moderating voice in their household with such diverse personalities, but after hours of tossing around in bed and turning the problem over in her mind, she was close to pulling her hair out in frustration. “While I never married as you did, I have been in enough relationships to know that talking with Mikael would be the best way to stop resentment building up. But I can’t. Until I know what is causing my frustration, its source, any discussion we have will end in another argument.”

“Maybe we are approaching this the wrong way,” Medea said with her head tilted in thought. “Rather than look at the argument, let us look at the situation as a whole. Pull back from the trees to see the forest.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you like Mikael?”

“Pardon?”

“What attracted you to him in the first place,” Medea explained. “For example, I fell in love with him because he had the opportunity to do to us what Aphrodite did to me, but he refused. From there, we spent time together, and things fell into place.”

“Isn’t that the same for all of us?”

“Right, I don’t know about all the others, but I do know Artoria fell for him because of his chivalric treatment of us despite the bad situation he was in. Yoruichi likes him because their personalities complement each other. Teasing, playful, and a bit sadistic. Like a pair of cats, really. Scathach was saved from living alone forever, gets all the fights she wants, and has many new things to experience. She also really enjoyed training him.”

“He has come a long way as a warrior,” Diana acknowledged.

“Some of his traits that are good points to one of us might be demerits to others.” Medea continued. “Yoruichi likes his playfulness, but Glynda wishes he would be more

serious. I appreciate his caution, but Tsunade desires he would be more direct. Robin likes his passion for learning and his love of history, but Yoruichi gets bored when he spends hours reading. I'm sure you appreciate how delicately he has handled his interactions with the heroes of this world, trying not to make any enemies. But Emma is frustrated by how passive he is being."

"Ranni would like him to act more kingly, but Robin shares his sense of humour," Diana nodded, understanding where Medea was going with it. "You and I can be friends even though we disagree on the subject of the gods. You think it is something similar. I am having a problem with him, not the situation or his request for more caution."

"We disagree on the subject of the gods because you don't see them for the scum that they are," Medea retorted, but there was no heat to her voice, so Diana let it slide. "But yes, if we can find out what you like about him, I think we can figure out what is causing this… frustration you are having with him. The lures and Dragon Aura are only add-ons. They cannot create attraction and emotions, only enhance them. Mikael is not perfect. None of us are. There are parts you like and parts you don't. What are they?"

"I would say my tastes are similar to Artoria's," Diana said after some thought. "I also admired how he treated us. We were living a life of luxury while he was suffering. Too many people would lash out at others in that situation, but he didn't. While his distrust of us and his paranoia were not something I agree with, I can understand them now that I know the whole situation. Even at his lowest, after I confronted him about our plan to use your Noble Phantasm, all he did was use Command Seals to prevent us from ordering him. Not only did he continue to treat us kindly, he still helped others. While we were teasing him and painting a picture for the locals earlier today, there is no denying his actions have made him a hero, at least in my eyes. And his dedication to our Family, to ensuring everyone is happy and that we are safe and cared for, is something I wholeheartedly admire."

"Ok, that is what you like about him. Now, what do you not like?"

"I do not like his stance on the gods," Diana responded after a moment. "I understand where it is coming from, and like yours, I can live with that. My gods are not yours, even if they share the same names. I also agree with Glynda that his tendency for humour in serious situations can be grating, as is his paranoia. Neither of those is a serious problem, though. Barry and Bruce had those same traits. His apathy is of more serious concern, but, as I said, his actions have proven that if he can, he will help his fellow man even if it inconveniences him."

"I am hearing a lot of back and forth here," Medea added. "All your complaints are tempered and qualified. What do you absolutely hate about him? Something that gets on

your nerves every time. For me, it is his puns. Whenever he makes one, I just want to curse his mouth shut. And he even has me doing it."

"Hate? Nothing springs to mind. I do not like how self-deprecating he is. Nor how he likes to flaunt his knowledge. He can be a bit of a hypocrite, too." Diana really tried to think, but nothing conjured the same frustration she felt after last night's argument. "But these are all small peeves, things I can live with but nothing I absolutely despise."

There was a long minute of silence as they tried to think about things they absolutely despised about the man, but it was hard.

Certainly, the lures, dragon aura, and other aspects of the Catalogue helped smooth over the edges, but, as a general rule, it was hard to hate a man who went out of his way to ensure they were as happy and cared for as they were.

More often than not, Diana's main problems in relationships were due to her status as a superheroine. Either her partner was endangered by her presence, felt threatened by her superior abilities, were jealous of her closeness to her comrades, or resented the lack of time spent together due to her frequent need to be on call in an emergency.

None of that was a problem with the current relationship. Not only had Mikael stated his support for her endeavours, but he had also put his money where his mouth was. Though he disagreed with her actions with Doomsday, he had still gone out of his way to set up a situation where she could return to being a heroine and spend time with the local versions of her friends.

Hell, even her open bisexuality, which was often a sticking point for both men and women she had dated in the past, hadn't been a problem.

While Mikael wasn't what Diana thought of when she thought of her ideal man, there was no denying he was a better partner than most she had tried to date in the past.

So, if she was happy with their current relationship, why was the argument last night bugging her so much.

"We've been going in circles here," Medea huffed in frustration.

"So you see my problem," Diana responded with a wry smile.

"By the way, while we're on the subject, I've always been curious about what finally did it."

"Did what?"

"Tipped you over the edge." Diana continued to look at her blankly, so Medea gave more context. "Emma once said you were the last of us to fall in love with him. You resisted the urge for half a year and only 'gave in' near the end of his third world. When was the moment you told yourself, 'this is the man for me!' What finally pushed you over the edge?"

“His conviction.”

As soon as the last syllable left her lips, Diana froze.

Maybe it was because they had spent the last few minutes delving into Diana’s feelings, both good and bad, but the words came out of her mouth without conscious thought.

“I never realized,” she said, eyes wide. “What I look for in a partner, I mean. Male or female, I find myself attracted to people with conviction. I have seen some of the most attractive people of each sex, the smartest, the strongest, or even the most moral and none of those guarantees I’ll become emotionally attached. While those are important to me, as they are to everyone, I think it has only been those with strong convictions I have fallen in love with. Looking back, conviction tends to overlap with other desirable traits, and I’ve missed it all these years.”

“Conviction?” Medea murmured to herself with a frown, eyebrows creased in thought.

Diana was on a roll, though.

“It was what first drew me to Steve Trevor. His conviction in fighting the Nazis and going to war despite his weakness compared to us Amazons was what first drew me from the Themyscria. From there, despite my occasional flings, the ones who stick with me are those who are firm in who they are. Bruce, in his relentless pursuit of justice, Clark in his quest to inspire others, Trevor and his fight for civil rights. Have you ever heard Artoria talk about her ideals? It is an experience. Even Mala, my first crush, was firm in her convictions against Man’s World.”

“Mikael’s conviction?” Medea half asked, eyes still distant and mouth turned upside down. She looked to be in deep thought and not happy about it.

“When I reflect on my time with him, two moments stick out to me. Early on, I found some of his traits admirable, but I never thought of him in a romantic light. I understood his attraction to some of you on an intellectual level but not on an emotional one. Then I met him before his fight with Gwyn. Before then, I had seen him grow more skilled and deadly, and more than one of you had expressed romantic interest. I supported Artoria’s bid for his affections and urged him not to leave him behind. I thought it too sad for that love to never have a chance to blossom. I also called him out on delaying things, of not rushing to the final confrontation. I practically called him a coward. He admitted, to my face, that he was scared. He was afraid that killing Gwyn would only be the start and there would be other worlds afterwards.”

“He was right.”

“He was, but that isn’t what sticks out to me. When I think about that conversation, the part that sticks out is the image of him walking away. He walked to a fight he knew he

would win but was scared to face the consequences. But he walked forward. A good man who knew nothing of war and had been beaten down by the cruelties of a new world was fighting for his freedom despite his fear. That was the first time I was certain he would be Free, no matter what stood in his way. Be they gods or men."

"That wasn't when you fell in love," Medea denied. "That was too early."

"It wasn't, but it was the first time I found him truly attractive and could see myself with him." Diana smiled sadly. That conversation in the Kiln was a mixed blessing, looking back. "We didn't know the extent of his situation. His death and revival. The length he spent in each world, and the real challenges he faced. He hid them from us all but Emma then. Had I known, I might have fallen then, understanding his true conviction. Instead, I fell in love when I confronted him about our plan to free Emma. I told him to his face that either he released her of control or we would. I blackmailed him, essentially."

"And you fell in love with him for that?" Diana couldn't help but smile at the witch's disbelieving look.

"I fell in love with him because he stood up to me," she explained. "I was blackmailing him. There are no two ways about it. It was not my proudest moment, but I still feel it was necessary for Artoria to have an honest relationship with him. And what did he do? He explained his situation in gruesome detail. His fears and how easy it would be to circumvent them if he was willing to compromise our free will with his command. He called us his wardens, the chains around his neck. I didn't know he was being literal at the time, but he left little room for doubt about his fear. Despite all those claims and the reasons he had to enslave us to his will, when I met his eyes and saw how terrified he was yet still so firm, I did not feel even an ounce of fear for my freedom. That was the moment I knew he was a man who would never back down from who he was and what he believed in. That was the moment I fell in love."

There was a beat of silence after Diana's declaration.

"I know what your problem is," Medea eventually said. It didn't look like the words brought her any pleasure. In fact, it looked like she had swallowed a lemon.

"Really?" Diana asked, surprised she could draw a conclusion from her recounting. "What is it?"

"Mikael isn't who you think he is." Every word out of her fellow greek's mouth was deliberate as if she wasn't sure she should say them. "Mikael is… Jason."

One only needed to hear the sheer venom put into the last name to know Medea was speaking of her ex-husband.

"While I am frustrated with Mikael, there is no need to insult him such," Diana frowned at her friend, a bit disappointed she would stoop so low.

“I am being serious,” Medea emphasized. “I am not insulting Mikael, just pointing out a realization I just had.”

“I fail to see how that is anything less the vilest insult you could utter. You have made no secret of your hatred for your ex-husband.”

“What I feel for that man and Aphrodite goes well beyond hatred,” Medea snarled. The rancour in her voice shocked even Diana, who thought she understood the woman’s feelings. “The other gods had a hand in my fate, and I hate them for it, but what I feel for those two goes well beyond that. I was cursed to fall in love with a man I had never even laid eyes on. They raped me in every conceivable way, physical and spiritual. They made me kill my brother, who I loved dearly. They made me drive my father to suicide. They used me for years. The Argo would have sunk at the first stop without me. That man received all the acclaim while I was vilified for my actions despite doing them at his command. I was the one who saved the argonauts, but I was the witch, not the hero.

Despite all that, all that had been inflicted on me, I would have continued to live a ‘happy life’, still cursed to love the fool. But when my use was up? They tossed me aside like trash. If I could inflict every torment, torture, every bit of pain this world and others have upon those two, I would do it with a smile. So when I compare the man I love to the one I despise with every fibre of my soul, you would do well to take my words to heart, Diana, Champion of the Gods!”

It was easy to forget sometimes, with how she acted, that Medea was a woman who had carved her name into legend through blood, magic, and betrayal.

Beneath the facade of the housewife who liked to cook, sow, go dancing and make dioramas was a vengeful Witch who had once sailed the seas with the greatest heroes the greek world had ever seen. Even Heracles, the Dioscuri, Caenus, Meleager, and dozens of others could attribute part of their survival and fame to the woman glaring up at her.

As someone who often saw the more misogynist side of history, especially in the first few decades after leaving Themyscria, Diana should have remembered that women were just as dangerous as men.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to belittle your words nor your insight, Medea, Princess of Colchis,” Diana apologized, using her full title to show her sincerity. “Especially not when I sought out your council and aid. However, like you, I do not find the captain of the Argo to be a good example and comparing him to our husband is not a flattering thing to say. I merely wished for an explanation.”

Medea took a deep breath as she retook her seat.

“I will accept your apology Diana of Themyscria, if you will accept mine. The subject is a touchy one for me, but that is no excuse to lash out.”

“Accepted and forgiven,” Diana said with a smile that Medea returned wanly.

“What I meant when I said Mikael is not who you think he is and that he is like… that man is not to denigrate him. Nor am I saying he lacks the conviction you find admirable in him. The problem you are having and your misunderstanding of the man is in the nature of said conviction. You said he and I share a mindset, and I will acknowledge there is some truth to that, but you are mistaken about something. You, I, or anyone in this Family, bar Mikael grew up with power. Whether that came from supernatural abilities, riches, positions of influence or all three, we all had power in some way. Mikael did not, and that has shaped his conviction.”

“Explain.”

“I am not denigrating any of our struggles. I trained, studied, fought and learned to get to where I am, as did we all, but our starting points differed. Even the most unfortunate of us had things that set us above the common rabble. Make no mistake, my ex-husband was a hero in the classical sense, if not the moral one. One could argue he was the greatest greek hero. He did not have the mind of Odysseus, the strength of Heracles, or the skills of Achilles. He was lacking in every way compared to every other greek hero you could name. And yet, it was he alone who could bring so many disparate heroes together and lead them. Do you know why?”

“Why?” Diana couldn’t help but ask, riveted by this rare positive look into a man so despised by his ex-wife.

“Because there was no low he would not sink to,” Medea said. “If he had to have the god’s mind control a woman to love him, then he did. If he had to kill, betray, ambush, poison, rob, or even commit genocide upon a township, he would. Running away from a fight wasn’t just a last option. It was an equally appealing one to fighting in the first place. Anything at all was permissible in the name of his goal. Mikael became like him, not through character but through necessity.”

“That does not sound like Mikael at all.”

“The *difference*,” Medea emphasized the last word. “Is in their goals. For… that man, the goal was always protecting his life. For Mikael, *WE* are the goal. Or at least we are now.”

“It was his Freedom,” Diana said with realization. “But now that he has that, it is the Family. And he will stop at nothing to protect it.”

“Exactly,” Medea nodded. “It was more evident in his first worlds when he wasn’t as skilled or powerful. He would use anything he could to win. Arrows from a distance, pyromancies, traps, and poison. Ranni told me his favourite tactic was to pretend to die, go invisible, and stab people in the back when they let their guard down. As he grew

stronger, he fought more 'fairly' but never forgot where he came from. Only once did he forgo dirty tricks when honest means failed, and that was when he was in the throes of grief for Melina. Even then, he triumphed eventually. It is easy to show conviction in the face of death when death isn't permanent. He fights not as a god, dragon, or hero but as a human. And humans are really good at running away."

"But he is a dragon," Diana argued despite herself. "He has all the power he could ever need. Mikael is millions of years old! He can help so many people. He shouldn't be so quick to run away!"

It took only a second of looking at Medea's smirk to realize she had shouted that last part.

"There it is," the witch said. "That is what is bothering you. Not asking for his help or even being more cautious. It is the fact someone whose conviction you admired and fell in love with seems to have regressed and become a coward. He can no longer stay firm in his beliefs and will run when things get dangerous. And he is urging you to do the same."

"I don't think he is a coward," Diana repeated. She honestly didn't. Definitely cautious, even paranoid, but not craven.

You could not call a man who went through all he did and rose above it a coward.

At the same time, she couldn't deny that the witch's words contained a ring of truth.

"But he sounded like one last night, didn't he? What else do you call a man who asks you to run away at the first sign of danger? He would argue running away and 'cowardly' tactics are good sense, and we might even agree, but that isn't how it sounds, does it? Both of those scenes you told me about featured a man facing his fear, standing up to figures of power," Medea said, retaking her seat with her fabric. "And that is what I meant when I told you you were mistaken about Mikael. Looking from the outside, he is a coward. He will run from a fight if he can't win it. He is overly cautious and worried about situations that will never happen. He would be more than willing to let hundreds of thousands die if it brought him more information on a dangerous foe. Then he would poison, weaken, and backstab that foe rather than face it in honourable combat.

But at the same time, he has conviction. A conviction to win, no matter the cost. If any of us were in any danger, he would do absolutely *anything* at all to see us home safe and sound. He wouldn't just let other people die for us. He would wield the blade and torch. We are his goal. His bottom line. I am curious to know how he has managed to keep acting so human as he does despite passing millions of years as a dragon and eldritch being. Despite everything, I know this; now that he has his happy ending, he is unwilling to risk losing it. So the question is: can you love a coward with conviction?"

It was a testament to how serious this conversation was and Diana's desire to be true

to herself that she took a deep look at her own feelings then.

She had been in relationships before. Sometimes, what people presented themselves as was different from what they truly were deep down. It wasn't rare for people to pretend to be moral to get close to Wonder Woman. They all slipped eventually, their mask cracking to show who they were at their core.

Last night's argument had unsettled her because it seemed Mikael was another example of such a character. Her belief in who he was had been shaken by this new aspect of his personality that she had never had to confront before.

Was this revelation a deal breaker?

Is Mikael still the man she fell in love with?

Can she love a coward with conviction?

"I can," Diana said to herself and the witch in realization. "I do. I can live with a man who is cautious or even cowardly if he is a good man and, when the time comes for him to draw his line in the sand, he stands firm with what convictions he has."

"You better hope that day never comes," Medea said, already back to work on the frilly dress she was weaving with her magic. "The day he needs to show you his conviction is the day he sheds his veneer of humanity. I do not know how or why he has kept it this long, but I do not want him to lose it."

"What about you?" Diana couldn't help but ask. "You just compared him to your ex-husband, someone you revile. Can you love a man like that?"

"Hm? Oh, I don't mind. The comparison is distasteful, to say the least, but Mikael's combat style does not bother me. It's a difference in priorities, I guess. If he was like that man in any other way, I would definitely have a problem." Pausing in her needlework, Medea looked up and met the amazon's eyes. "Still, I am glad we had this talk, even if it pointed out a part of him I am not fond of. Take it from me; you do not want to be blindly in love. That is not a good thing. You had a concern, you talked to someone about it, and I was able to help you out. That is really all we can do."

"But Mikael is so accepting," Diana frowned. "Now that I know what bothered me, I can revaluate that argument. We were rather harsh. I cannot help but feel I am taking advantage of him. All he was doing was worrying for our sake. After he went out of his way to aid us as well."

"You are forgetting that Mikael has observed us for our entire time on the Island," Medea said with a chuckle. "He might not know everything about us, but we have only had less than a month of regular contact with him. Less than a week since he has gotten his body back. We have time."

"Perhaps Artoria and I should do something nice for him?" Diana asked herself and

the witch. “To show there were no hard feelings if nothing else.”

“Good luck,” Medea responded with a grumble. “I have been trying to think of a gift for last night, but I’ve been coming up blank. I wasn’t kidding when I said he is living his happy ending. He will always worry about us, about the situation, and about everything, really. That is just who he is. But neither Ranni, Melina, nor I have ever seen him as happy as he has been since regaining his body. Raven tells me that every time he goes flying, he looks deranged from the wide smile on his face.”

“I will think on it and let you know if I have a good idea,” Diana shook her head and stood from her seat. “Thank you for your help. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. What are friends for? Wives? Sister-wives? Whatever. What is Family for?”

As Medea returned to her work, Diana left feeling more sure of herself than when she entered the room.

Truly, Artoria was right when she called Medea her general in the war of love.

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“Have no fear. We are here!” I declared grandly as I stepped from the swirling portal of shadow.

Shit, one of these days, I will have to find out what this world has in terms of Anime. Leviathan hadn’t sunk part of Japan, so they had to have something, right?

I don’t need a lot, just Jojo.

It was 2018, but I am okay with waiting a few years for the end of Stone Ocean and seeing Steel Ball Run animated.

Please, Lord Dio?

I will say 10 hail Mudas in your honour if you exist in this world.

“Welcome to PRT south by southeast,” Nightwing said, holding out his hand. “Otherwise known as the Teen Titans.”

The fact he responded so lamely to my All Might-style arrival did not speak well of my chances for Jojo.

“It is a pleasure to me you,” Glynda said as she shook his hand. I took it in turn, but there was something I had to ask.

“How did you get that name? You aren’t anywhere near a teenager, and neither is your team.” I was genuinely curious as I couldn’t find out online. There were a lot of theories, but there was no definite answer.

“It’s standard practice for larger Protectorate teams to get their nicknames,”

Nightwing explained with a charming smile to all three of us. He was in uniform, so his eyes were hidden by a domino mask, but it couldn't hide his emotions. "Avengers in New York, Ultraforce in Arkansas, Thunderforce in Florida, and so on. This team was originally supposed to be called the Titans, after the shape of our building. Since most of us were pretty young when we founded it, and many were known as former sidekicks, some news reporters jokingly referred to us as the Teen Titans. The name stuck even as our team grew."

"And where is the rest of your team?" Scathach asked, looking around the almost empty lobby.

Almost empty.

We sent Artoria and Diana off to brunch with the locals, asking them to let them know we'd be stopping by the Titan Tower around noon local time. Plenty of time to prepare.

I love having the power to arbitrarily decide things like that. I got a good chuckle out of the image of them scrambling to formulate a response or try and figure out my goals in this sudden decision to 'train' a bunch of heroes.

Even if I liked heroes and was willing to play nice for my wives' sake, I was still a petty and sadistic man.

"They're waiting for us in the training room," Nightwing explained but made no move to lead us there. "I just have a few questions before anything happens."

"Ask."

Glynda and I kept quiet and let Scathach take the lead. This was her show.

"What are you hoping to accomplish here?" Nightwing's genial smile fell, replaced by a stoic look as he met the gaze of the shorter woman, almost glaring at her with suspicion. "Why the sudden decision to train heroes? And why us?"

"Since I returned to earth, I have been disappointed by most of the heroes of this world," the celt responded. Her words were insulting, but her tone was a matter of fact. Fire was hot, water was wet, and heroes were disappointing.

Harsh.

"I have seen some wondrous abilities, but out of hundreds of 'supers', only a handful have even a modicum of skill. Too many rely on their power, whatever it might be that they did not hone it to a fine edge. I despise the wasted potential."

"Why now?" Nightwing pressed. "And why my team?"

"Now? Because my husband tells me you are looking for an excuse to spy on us." Credit where it is due, Nightwing did not even blink at the accusation. "Diana also wishes us to make nice with you. By being here now, I have accomplished all our goals. Mikael called it a 'polite fiction that benefits all'. I care not if you seek to gain an advantage over

us, try to find some weakness, or whatever other plot you might have. I am here to see if your team is worth my time. Nothing more, nothing less."

"And why my team in specific?"

"I would prefer to start a bit younger, but you are some of the most youthful active combatants. I will make do."

There was no Ward program in this world. Instead most young heroes went through an apprenticeship program. Someone could apply to the Protectorate to become a sidekick of an active hero. The hero didn't have to accept, but most did if the applicant had a similar powerset, skills or other factors that might endear the applicant to their desired hero.

The hero was generally responsible for everything the sidekick did, and there were incentives to make sure they taught them right. Those who broke the law were punished severely to compensate for the extra responsibility. Still, every time one of their protegees joined an accredited team, the teacher got a stipend as the government was always looking to increase the roster of heroes.

Whether it was the practicality of more heroes, the moral imperative of teaching the youth, the fame of being known as a good teacher, or the monetary reward, one could clearly see the benefits of having a sidekick or two.

Even those who applied but did not manage an apprenticeship could still find training in institutions dedicated to training people with powers. The Xavier Institute and Protectorate Academy were the most famous in the US.

It was a hodge-podge system that didn't satisfy everyone, but it generally worked. Unlike in Worm, where an active force like Cauldron shaped the world a certain way, this one's power, systems, and institutions had grown organically as needs changed and evolved. It meant this world was less controlled, regulated, and oppressive but more inefficient.

A tradeoff I actually liked.

Most of the current roster of the Teen Titans came from that apprenticeship system. Some had only 'graduated' in the last few years.

Scathach hadn't been wrong to say they were the youngest group, as shown by their leader being Nightwing, who was only mid-twenties at best.

Of course, she also knew the other reasons we were here, but the locals didn't need to know that.

"And what will you be teaching?" Nightwing continued to press.

"How to fight." She said plainly, and I could see how that answer didn't please the hero by the furrowing of his brow. "You are not my students. I am not your teacher. I am

here for a week to see if you have potential and are willing to put forth the effort to nurture it. I will not be teaching you specific techniques or abilities. Nor will I be crafting dedicated regiments. Anything after this week will depend on what you show me. If you impress me, then we will see about teaching more."

There was a tense moment where Nightwing tried to stare down the celt, but she remained unaffected.

Nothing scared Scathach except for the prospect of returning to her previous situation in Dun Scath.

At the end of the day, I considered Scathach the most hardheaded of everyone in the Family. She just rarely showed it due to how taciturn she appeared. But when it came to subjects she cared about, such as teaching and combat, nobody could change her mind.

"Fine," the former Robin eventually gave in. "We are here to learn about each other, and I will not turn away one of the most renowned teachers of heroes when it could benefit my team. But I will be keeping an eye on you. All of you."

"Hey, don't look at me," I said with a smile, raising my hands as if in surrender. "I am just here to look pretty and for emotional support. These two are the ones who'll be training you all. Think of me as the cheerleader. Teen Titans Go!"

Nightwing didn't look amused by my little joke, nor the way I had spread my hands as if holding pom-poms in the shape of a T, but he did turn his attention to Glynda.

That's fine.

I'd get you to laugh before the end of the week.

Just wait.

"And you, Ms. Goodwitch?" He asked, not unkindly but still seriously. "I have seen your work, which is impressive, but none of my teammates are telekinetics. Raven can use magic to a similar effect, but that is it. What is your experience with teaching? And can it benefit my team?"

It said a lot about how much Nightwing cared about his team and that he was taking the time to quiz us for their sake. Not once had he asked about what he would get.

I'm sure it was a coincidence that it also allowed him to dig for information.

"Over a decade as the vice-headmistress at the premier combat institution of my home world," Glynda presented her credentials calmly, the expression not shifting from her 'resting teacher face'. During that time, I was *the* combat instructor for hundreds of students who all fought in unique styles. Even if their abilities are not similar to my own, I can teach them all the same. And it is Mrs."

"What type of combat school? Hero? Gladiatorial? Entertainment?" I almost snorted in laughter at the image of Glynda Goodwitch teaching the likes of the WWE, but I

managed to keep it to a slight chuckle.

"The type of school that needed tens of graduates every year ready to fight and die to prevent my race's extinction from an all-consuming force of evil," Glynda responded just as calmly as before. Still, I was familiar enough with her to hear the tightness of her voice.

While my situation had sucked thanks to the Company, I never forgot that every one of the ten women summoned had come from 'dead ends'. For all that I had a shit deal, I still knew my family and friends were safe in my homeworld.

They had lost everything. Everyone they knew or loved before arriving on the Island was dead and gone. They had died themselves.

It was one of the reasons I was so supportive of Diana's bid to connect with the local versions of her friends and family. I would do the same for any of the others.

Time to change the subject.

"I have a question of my own," I said, saving the young man from potentially putting his foot in his mouth without realizing it. "A super serious one. A life and death one. I need you to be one hundred percent honest, or it could be the end of the world as we know it."

"What?" Nightwing asked with a frown.

"How long has he been standing there?" I jerked a thumb over my shoulder without looking. "I mean, we noticed right away. When you can see in the dark, black clothes in shadows actually stand out more than white clothes during the day. I just need to know how long he has been waiting to come out of the shadows all dramatically. Please tell me it's been at least an hour."

Nightwing didn't even try and hide his chuckle when Batman stepped from a dark corner of the lobby, likely set up that way, with a Bat-scowl firmly in place.

Forget by the end of the week, I got Nightwing to laugh within ten minutes.

Man, I am good.

Author's Note:

A transitional chapter but one I ended up liking. I look forward to playing with Scathach's character some more, as well as interactions with the Teen Titans. I am also looking forward to a few more lighthearted chapters and some smut, as these last two chapters have been more introspective than others. The pacing will pick up a bit more too.

I think it is essential to evaluate your relationships from time to time, especially romantic ones. You do not need to like everything about your partner. In fact, if you think you do, then you aren't being honest with yourself. What parts you don't like must be something you can live with. Otherwise, your relationship is doomed to tragedy. The Catalogue does a lot of the heavy lifting in getting the relationship going, but since being 'bound' does not mean being in 'love', it also doesn't make the Family blind to each other's faults.

It was only as I wrote this chapter that I realized how similarly I had been characterizing Mikael to Jason as he is presented in FGO. It isn't the same, as Medea says Jason's end goal was to preserve his life while Mikael's was his Freedom and then his Family.

It also shows the difference between what I consider 'classical heroes' and 'superheroes'. I do not think there is a 'classical' hero that hasn't done things we consider morally repugnant today. To say nothing about Heracles, Cu is well known to have raped women (he forced Scathach's sister to bear him a son). Even King Arthur has done some nasty shit in mythology. At one point, he sunk a ship full of children because one of them might be the person who would bring about Camelot's ruin.

You aren't wrong for those who felt that Artoria and Diana were unreasonable last chapter, but you must remember they come from a different place than Mikael. As Medea mentioned, they come from a place of privilege. It was very, very rare that they were not the most badass people around. Not only that, but in the fight with Doomsday, they barely got hurt at all and won without loss. To them, Mikael is being way overcautious.

I tried to characterize them as I see them. Artoria is used to going off on her own if she thinks she's right. (See the Fate route where she rushes off Ryuudou Temple to fight Caster to stop her from killing people and almost dies to Kojiro. I wonder if Nasu was making a Monty Python reference when she was nearly killed like a swallow.) Diana doesn't mind calling for help, but if she gets it in her head that she is right, she will do everything alone if she thinks she can. (See the story where Wonder Woman defeats the entire league to save them from an evil dragon.)

It is not only Mikael that is flawed. Everyone is. One of the reasons I wanted to deep dive into a Catalogue fic was that I wanted to play with that aspect as it is severely under-explored in fics where people treat these fictional characters as if they are perfect or should be.

I absolutely hate when people, fictional or otherwise, are considered perfect. There are admirable and reviled traits in everyone. People you like are just those whose admirable characteristics outweigh the others to you.

Also, this is your weekly reminder that all narrators in this fic are unreliable. The two scenes Diana remembers fondly are Mikael remembers much differently. When I was writing Volume 1, I did not choose scenes at random to fill out the word count or to be dramatic. They are important to the characters. In the last chapter, we saw the argument from Mikael's perspective, not Artoria's or Diana's. Were they in the wrong? Yes. Even they admitted it last chapter. But right or wrong isn't everything in an argument.

Feelings matter too.

We are not machines.

I've rambled for too long, so I'll get off my soapbox. I'll just wish everyone a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukah, or a Great Holiday.

I'll see you all next week.

FURLOUGH IV

In a town without a name, in a heavy downpour
Thought he passed his own shadow, by the backstage door
Like a trip through the past, to that day in the rain
And that one guitar, made his whole life change
Now he needs to keep on rockin', he just can't stop
Gotta keep on rockin', that boy has got to stay on top

There was an intense silence in the lobby of the Titans Tower.

On one side, I stood with my Family.

On the other was the Caped Crusader, the Man with a Plan, DCs very own Deus Ex Machina, the meme-lord himself, Batman.

You could cut the tension with a knife.

"…what is he doing?"

Or, if you are Nightwing, with a whisper.

Glynda let out a long-suffering sigh.

"He's Dio-posing."

It was all I could do not to laugh at how defeated she sounded when she said the words. As if the mere fact that she could recognize a Jojo reference was enough to make her want to die.

When I had first landed on Earth, baring spending time with the Family, working with Medea to try and build a body, and flying, I had a lot of time on my hands while the rest of the women went out to verify our knowledge of the world.

Thankfully, the mansion came equipped with every book, game, or show ever produced up to the time of our joining from our home worlds. This included all the Dark Souls games and Bloodborne.

The only reason the women of the Family didn't know about it was that Priscilla was the only one to play video games. Even then, she disliked RPGs and had yet to explore that portion of our game library. In the year she spent on the Island, she hadn't even made a dent in the fighting games alone, let alone others.

Even if she had played them, it is not like it would have helped me. I had spent so much time in those worlds I knew them inside and out. Elden Ring would have been the exception, but it had yet to be released by the time of my incarceration and was thus not included in the mansion.

With all my hobbies available to me and time to kill, what did I do?

Did I use that free time to rewatch every episode of Jojo's Bizzare Adventure up to Stone Ocean?

Yes. Yes, I did.

Among other things, watching TV together is a great way to spend time with a partner when you want a stress-free day. It can be an excellent way to learn about your partner's likes and dislikes and lead to more conversation starters later.

Glynda, Medea, and Priscilla had been the three most often relegated to Baby-Cthulu-sitting duty. The witch was usually engaged with her other hobbies, and most of my time with Priscilla was spent playing multiplayer games. That left Glynda as the woman who spent the most time with me when we would watch TV.

To be honest, she got the better deal.

Sure, she watched the entire Jojo series and other shows I was interested in, but I had to sit through her soap operas.

If I had to sit through one more melodramatic confession of betrayal, cheating partners, long-dead twins, or similar drama for stupid reasons, I would reject my humanity.

"…how long is this going to go on for?" Nightwing asked in another whisper.

I didn't look at him, too busy winning the stare-down with Batman.

My proudest achievement to date.

I couldn't help it.

I was in a playful mood.

Yesterday had started as a cluster fuck, but after coming to an agreement with Diana and Artoria, I then went on to spend a night on the town with six incredible women. Capping it off by taking Nico Robin to bed for hours of intense sex.

It was hard not to feel giddy.

"If we let him?" Glynda asked rhetorically, sounding absolutely done. "Literally forever."

"You know, my team is waiting. I thought this would take less time. They aren't even saying anything. Just staring at each other."

Nightwing was clearly young. He didn't understand the battle of wills between the Dark Knight and me.

Clearly, Bruce needed to teach him better.

Of course, there is a victor and a loser in all battles.

"I have had enough of this," Scathach said as she reached up and swatted me on the back, breaking my stare-off with the Bat.

And my pose.

In a battle between two men, it is their wives that win.

Though both wives were mine, I counted it as my win by technicality.

The best kind of win.

“Come on.” I was not pouting. You were. “He was clearly doing it too. I didn’t even get to make the joke.”

“You can make it later,” Scathach said. Neither she nor Glynda looked really angry, but they were definitely done with my shit, so I refrained from commenting. Turning to the leader of the Titans, she spoke. “Lead us to the rest of your team. I will evaluate them.”

Nightwing subtly looked to his former mentor, and whatever he saw in the caped man must have been a signal because the former Robin nodded at the Celt.

“I figured you’d want something like that,” he turned and started to lead us deeper into the building. “They’re gathered in our largest training room. I’ll show you the way. It is underground, so we’ll take the elevator. Most of the PRT staff are gone for the day.”

Probably to protect them if it turned out we were hostile. This lobby was probably a kill box or as close as the former partners could make it in their limited time. They had reduced as many variables as they could before meeting us.

Impressive for only a few hours of warning.

Both Glynda and Scathach followed him, and I made to do the same when a voice stopped us in our tracks.

“Elden Lord.”

Jesus, did the man gargle rocks? Or was it some sort of voice modulator? Either way, I looked at Batman with an eyebrow raised in question.

The hero had moved as we did, though he was walking towards another doorway, not looking at us.

I rolled my eyes.

Both women looked at me with a question in their eyes, and I nodded at them to follow Nightwing as I followed his mentor.

His not-too-subtle powerplay wasn’t a good enough reason for me not to at least see where this was going. And, as I said, I was feeling playful.

“Na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na… BATMAN!”

If I was humming Adam West’s Batman theme under my breath?

Well, that was just because I found how he tensed the first few times I said his name funny.

I finished my song after we had passed through a few twisting hallways and down a few flights of stairs. I didn’t comment on the man’s knowledge of the layout of a protectorate building despite being a member of the Justice League.

Information security? What is that? Is it tasty?

Batman led me to a steel door and opened it without issue despite the card reader next to it being red.

The room itself was small, but it also wasn't cramped. A few chairs and a desk were the only pieces of furniture. The central standout was one wall entirely made out of glass. I followed Gotham's Knight to look out into an absolutely massive room.

Easily the size of a football field and tens of meters deep, we looked out over the underground training field illuminated by bright ceiling lights that were only a few feet above us.

I saw the other Titans milling about and talking to each other.

Beast Boy, a green-skinned young man who could turn into animals.

Winman, formerly Kid Win, a tinker specializing in modular items.

Starfire, a Tamaranean, a gold-skinned alien who could fly and fire bolts of superheated plasma.

X-23, Wolverine's clone/daughter, had a similar regeneration ability and an adamantine skeleton.

Mercury, a mutant whose entire body was made of silvery liquid mercury, could manipulate her body into various forms.

With seven active members, including Nightwing, this protectorate division was mid-size for one city, though small for the population. All the members were on the younger side, and none had any sidekicks. Despite protecting a city of over three million with few numbers, the Teen Titans' ability to hit above their weight class, their relative youth, and their long service made them one of the most popular teams in the US.

Batman and I watched the large doors on one side of the field open, allowing entree to my wives and Nightwing and drawing the attention of the young heroes.

We couldn't hear what they were saying from up here, but we could see the leader of the Titans say something to his team.

Then he was almost impaled by Gae Bolg.

As I watched the Queen of the Land of Shadows tear through the Teen Titans, Glynda watching from the side and making notes, I turned to the man standing beside me.

"So," I asked, not even trying to hide my humour at the situation. "Why so serious?"

******

Raven fought to keep her face from showing any emotion.

Then she fought harder to stop feeling any emotion at all.

She failed.

“She’s blue. I’m green. It’s a total match.” Raven could feel the undercurrent of lust and envy in Garfield as he showed a picture to Chris.

“She’s also a goddess. And married. That’s not cool, man, and I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to get on the bad side of a dragon that ate the Simurgh” despite his words, Raven could also feel a tinge of lust in Chris. Unlike their green friend, it was tinged with fear.

A lot of fear.

Understandable. The Simurgh had been a nightmare for everyone, especially psychics and tinkers. It was the right move to be wary of a creature that had eaten it in one gulp.

Raven tried to smother the anger the thought of the Elden Lord brought. It wasn’t his fault they had been deployed to the other side of the world for a fight that never happened. Nor was he responsible for the lack of sleep last night, as Nightwing wanted to brief the team on the situation that had occurred while they were in Australia.

It also wasn’t his fault that the team had spent the last twenty minutes in their training hall waiting for their illustrious leader to arrive and let them know why he had gathered them.

This was one of the few times Raven had a day off, and she could spend it reading, meditating, or doing anything other than standing around doing nothing.

“Not her,” Garfield protested. “But she’s an alien, right? So there are bound to be more like her where she’s from, right? So I find out where she’s from, ask Star for directions, and we go there on vacation. I hear the League is working on some spaceships now that Ziz is gone. A week or two off, and we drown in blue tail. It’ll be awesome!”

“And how will we find out where she is from?” Chris continued to look dubious.

Raven consciously tried to tune out the rest of that stupid conversation.

The girls weren’t much better.

“Look, I don’t judge,” Cessily was telling Kori. Laura was nearby but, much like Raven, preferred to keep silent. “If it works for them, great. But if a guy I’m dating tries to sleep with others, no matter the reason, I will show him exactly what I think of cheating.” Her hand flowed into a silvery mace, which she swung for emphasis.

“But Friend Mercury,” Kori pressed with a pout. She was flying probably a bit too close to the mutant than was comfortable, but most of the Titans were well used to the alien’s friendliness. “What about other males? If one boy-friend is good, two or more must be of the better?” Despite her words, Raven only felt pure curiosity from the gold-skinned woman.

“Now that is different,” Cessily said with a smirk. There was definitely lust in her

mind as well as amusement. “A guy can’t get you off? Move on to the next. One of them is bound to know what they are doing. But that is only for a wild night or two. Not something I would want long term. Too many personalities. If you fight with one boyfriend, imagine the fights with two or three?”

“Were polyamourous relations common on Tameran?” Laura asked before the alien princess asked another question.

“Very much so. There was lots of the love to go around. As a princess, I was to be of the married to one person, like my parents. It is for the… Blood road?”

“Bloodline,” Cessily corrected quickly.

“Bloodline.”

Raven also tuned them out and decided to get what meditation she could while they continued to wait.

Of course, as soon as she decided to do that, the doors to the training room opened, admitting Nightwing and two unexpected guests.

Raven felt Laura’s emotions churn at the sight of the purple-clad woman.

While the mutant had moved to the west coast to get independence from her ‘father’, X-23 and Wolverine still cared for each other. Anger, wariness, admiration and confusion warred in her at the sight of the woman who had handily kicked Weapon X’s ass.

“These are Scathach and Glynda Goodwitch,” Nightwing introduced the women. As if he hadn’t spent last night going over the dossiers with them that the League had thrown together after the ‘Doomsday Incident’.

Scathach: Irish/Scottish (depending on the telling). Melee and likely magic. Known as a trainer of famous heroes. Can summon spears. Can likely turn into a dragon.

Glynda Goodwitch: Extreme telekinetic, possibly telepathic. Possible melee abilities depending on the use of a riding crop. Possible magic user. Can definitely turn into a dragon. Dragon form enhances already considerable telekinesis.

Both were ‘consorts’ of the Elden Lord and very formidable women.

But what were they doing here?

Just as her teammates were looking at them, the pair were eyeing the Titans, looking them up and down. Evaluating them. Judging them. Raven could not feel their emotions, but she thought their eyes remained on her longer than the others.

“Duuuuddddeeeee,” Garfield said in a low whisper.

“I know, right?” Chris responded just as lowly.

The way both women looked at the young men made it clear they had heard them, and one didn’t need to be an empath like Raven to know what they were thinking.

“To foster communication,” Nightwing continued as if he hadn’t heard his male

teammates. “These two have volunteered to act as ambassadors for the rest of their group. They will be with us for a week and have volunteered to act as combat instructors. They claim to have extensive experience teaching.”

Raven felt a ripple of discontent and wounded pride pass through her teammates at their leaders’ words.

Their team was young, sure, but they also had been heroes for years. They knew what they were doing. On top of small timers like Control Freak or HIVE, they had contended with the likes of Dakan, Sabretooth, Crimson and Winter, and The Fallen. Even Mole Man a few times since the Fantastic Four had retired.

They weren’t the Justice League or the Avengers, but they were still one of the Protectorate’s stronger and more popular branches.

“You are not convinced,” Scathach said plainly as she noticed the effects of Nightwing’s words. “Then let me convince you.”

Then she stabbed Nightwing in the back.

He was probably expecting something like this when he incited his teammates, so he was ready to dodge out of the way, turning to face the Celt and drawing his escrima sticks to block any follow-up blows.

Their leader definitely didn’t expect the woman to run behind him again and plant her foot in his ass, sending him flying over Goodwitch’s head and back toward the entrance. The hero recovered and landed in a roll, turning to face the group.

The taller blonde didn’t even blink at the outbreak of violence, drawing a tablet from somewhere and stepping to the side.

“You have courage,” Glynda said to their leader. Scathach just watched the hero, her back towards the Titans, who were still blinking in surprise. “And skill. You should have gotten closer to your team and alerted them to your plan before trying to instigate a fight, especially against an unfamiliar enemy. Now the rest of you, attack.”

As if taking her words as orders, the group threw themselves into action.

Starfire was the quickest, blasting star bolts at the back of the woman even as she flew closer. The Celt quickly side-stepped the blasts without even looking and turned around slowly in time to catch a gold-skinned arm extended in a punch.

Scathach tossed Starfire over her shoulder.

“Good speed and strength. Like your leader, you should have waited. Taken shots and maintained your distance until you could attack with the rest.” Glynda said, writing something on her tablet.

Beast Boy bore down on the purple-clad woman as an enormous green-skinned rhino, ready to gore the enemy on his horn.

“Good instincts,” Glynda commented as Scathach side-stepped and planted the butt of her spear in the nape of the creature’s neck. It was a testament to its thick hide that when it turned back into a man, he was only coughing slightly rather than dealing with a collapsed larynx. “You two are the only ones who’ve attacked with intent to kill. Mercy is the blessing of the strong. You are not the strong in this fight.”

“Ack!” Beast Boy’s cleaver reply would never be heard.

X-23, hidden by the rhino’s bulk and the other person of whom Glynda spoke, just growled. Two metal claws on each hand flashed at Scathach’s throat while she was striking the green beast.

The Celt took one step back and swung her spear as she avoided the claw. The heroine ducked under the weapon, her foot lashing upwards. The metal claw passed harmlessly in front of the Celt’s face.

“You are the Wolverine’s child?” Scathach asked, speaking for the first time. “You move like him.”

Then she used her spear to impale the young woman’s remaining foot to the ground.

“Laura!” Mercury cried as she caught up to her friend, who had cried out in pain. The silvery woman placed herself between her friend and Scathach, who had summoned a new spear to deflect a few bullets from Winman on his hoverboard.

“Instinct will only get you so far,” Glynda continued to take notes. “Even if you can heal, it is better to avoid blows whenever possible. Especially if they inhibit movement. And you. Why did you not attack? Protecting a comrade is good. Doing so when they are not in danger is stupid. You wasted a valuable opening.”

Raven hadn’t been idle while the others fought. She had been concentrating on her magic, pulling the equipment from its place along the walls and gathering it into a massive lump to throw at the purple-haired woman. Winman tossed one of his AOE stun pads into the mess, a hidden trap if the woman tried to dodge.

The woman effortlessly weaved around the bars, bags, dumbells, and other exercise equipment, only needing to bat away a few metal bars that Raven took personal control of. The stun pad landed nearby, and Winman pressed his remote detonator.

Before the first spark escaped the device, a barbed spear split it.

“You lack control,” Glynda looked up for the first time from her pad to watch Raven’s attack. “A few well-directed attacks are better than one big blind one. And next time you try and trap someone like that, attach the device to another object to hide it. The point of a trap is to be unseen.”

Though only a few seconds had passed since the start of the brawl, Nightwing had already returned and was engaging Scathach with his weapons.

They exchanged a few blows before Beast Boy tried to entangle the woman as an octopus. While the Celt dodged and batted away the appendages, Nightwing took the distraction as an opportunity to drop a smoke bomb, obscuring the area.

Raven pulled Beast Boy from the smoke, also removing the spear from X-23s foot, as Starfire and Winman blasted the area from the air. The Cambion guided the weapon along the ground, aiming to keep it unnoticed.

A heeled boot emerged from the debris, kicking the red spear up at Winman, knocking his hoverboard from the air and sending him tumbling down.

Starfire stopped firing to catch him while Mercury wrapped herself around Scathach's other leg. X-23 lunged, her claws extended to impale the unbalanced opponent.

The Celt turned her weapon kick into a backwards cartwheel, severing the liquid metal from her foot with her other spear. Her backward movement placed her back into the smoke, obscuring her from view slightly, but X-23 followed her in, her enhanced senses aiding her. Nightwing was already duelling the woman, having charged forward as soon as Starfire stopped firing.

"Much better teamwork," Glynda complimented, typing once more. "The smoke was a bad call. It inhibited your vision more than hers. Mercury should have tried to cut off the foot the moment she had it. Starfire should have left the rescue to Beast Boy while she aided the group."

"I'm not trying to maim her!" Mercury cried in disbelief.

"You should be," Glynda continued plainly, not even looking up. "The healing of this world can fix a lame foot. Only my husband can fix death. And he will not. So if you have to choose between crippling an enemy and the lives of others, whatever you decide is what you have to live with."

"This is training!" Winman answered in turn, strafing around to recollect his board.

"This is training," the blonde agreed, but her voice sounded anything but comforting. "Scathach is teaching you to fight." Raven banished the smoke, allowing her to catch sight of Scathach twirling her spear to knock X-23's claws into Nightwing's escrima stick. "We have different teaching styles and goals. By the end of this week, you will fear her much more than me. Listening to me will spare you some pain."

Beast Boy entered the fray by flying above the woman as a hummingbird and turning into a whale, angled to not land on his teammates.

The Celt planted her spear tip down in the ground and took two steps away and closer to Nightwing. The changeling's weight drove him down on the weapon, and the sound that escaped the massive creature made the cambion's body shake.

"Do not expect her to be kind." Glynda continued once the Beast Boy turned back into

his human form. “She has killed more of her students than have graduated. Her most famous pupil fought an army by himself and died standing tall after tying his guts to a rock. She will train you to be your best. She will only care about the wasted potential if you fail along the way.”

Mercury took the lack of weapon in the Celt’s hand as an opportunity to make up for her earlier lack of attack. As the purple-haired woman exchanged fists with Nightwing’s weapons, the mutant curved her body around her leader to attack as a halo of blades of liquid metal, ready to impale the woman.

Scathach, rather than try and dodge or conjure another weapon, stepped closer to her opponent to grab the former Robin’s wrist and pull him forward, forcing the mutant to cancel her blades or risk friendly fire.

“She is teaching you to fight,” Glynda repeated with emphasis. “I am teaching you to survive. Her goal for students is to become the best they can be. My goal is for my students to make it home alive. You have one week. If, in the end, we find your dedication, skill, or talent lacking, we will leave to find better prospects. We are not so bored as to take students who do not learn and will die.”

“We didn’t ask for this!” Beast Boy yelled as he turned into a velociraptor and scrambled around from the melee approaching his downed form. Raven took the chance to pull both spears Scathach had summoned since the start of the battle away to prevent the Celt from rearming.

Winman released half a dozen drones, firing non-lethal but painful sparks at the woman. He had been using the last few moments to summon his power armour piece by modular piece and was now fully kitted out. He was taking care of suppressing fire, so Starfire landed on the ground behind the purple-haired woman.

“This has been most fun,” the tamaranean said with a joyful smile. “But we have you surrounded.”

Weaponless, Scathach faced Nightwing. A hissing velociraptor on her left and a growling X-23 on her right, with a tamaranean princess behind. Around the group was a ring of liquid metal. In the air, six drones circled quickly under the watchful eye of Winman. Raven kept her distance, acting more as battlefield control than an active combatant but ready to start blasting if she got the opportunity.

It was a setup they had used multiple times in the past to devastating effects. Even Deathstroke fell into their hands when they managed to get their act together.

“If you think your status as heroes will give you special consideration, you are wrong.” Glynda continued, uncaring for the predicament of her fellow. “You didn’t ask for it, but if you do not take opportunities to learn when you have them, you are completely

hopeless. I have seen a man rise to heights you cannot imagine with only the barest of instruction from us and starting with much worse fundamentals. He took advantage of everything he could get his hands on. I do not expect you to get that far, but if you refuse aid when given freely, even if painfully, we will simply leave."

There was a moment of silence as the Titans not only digested Glynda's words but also readied to attack the Celt.

They never got the chance.

"I've seen enough," Scathach said.

"Titans G-" Nightwing's order to charge was cut off by the woman stepping up to him and lashing out with a fist. He blocked it with his baton, but Scathach used her shorter stature to use her other fist to get inside his guard and punch him in his throat.

"Gak," the hero didn't even have time to gag before he was grabbed by the throat and tossed in the way of a leaping raptor.

Using his fallen weapons, Scathach batted away two clawed fists and smashed them into the temples of X-23. Even if she could heal, the brain-rattling gave the Celt the time to toss the escrima sticks at two of the drones, downing them, and grab the mutant's extended arms. Ducking under the feral woman's armpit, wrenching the limb in the process, Scathach avoided a punch from Starfire that could have destroyed a building. Manhandling X-23 like a puppet, the Celt continued her circling to slice a gash through the alien princess' side with an adamantium-tipped fist.

Raven grabbed the falling drones with her magic, tossing them at the opponent as she pulled both X-23 and Starfire away. Winman used his four remaining drones to rain bullets down now that his teammates were not blocking.

Scathach, in a feat of acrobatics that would have made anyone jealous, jumped over Mercury, trying to entangle her feet in place once more. She landed on one of the broken drones coated in Raven's magic with a light step. The half-demon cancelled her spell to let that one fall and concentrated on blasting the woman out of the air.

Scathach hopped over the blast of dark energy in a backflip, sending the drone down at an angle to land in the puddle that was Mercury. The remaining electricity in the machine sent the mutant into a spasming fit as her body was destabilized.

Raven released more power, changing her dark lance into a massive energy cone. She was trapped in midair, with bullets raining down on her and a magic blast tearing its way toward her.

Scathach smiled a little to herself.

She summoned a spear, not to her hand, but under her feet. Using it as a stepping stone, she launched herself further skyward. In less time than it took to blink, the Celt had

grabbed the lip of Winman's hoverboard. With a pull and a twist of her body, the purple-haired woman flipped around the aircraft and kicked the hero from his perch.

He fell.

Though Raven knew his armour would absorb most of the blow, she tried to catch her teammate.

She failed when, in action that displayed supreme control of her body, Scathach continued her midair spin and tossed the hoverboard in her hand. It flew across the room in less than a blink to smack Raven in the sternum, driving the air from her lungs and knocking her from the air.

Scathach landed lightly on her feet as Raven and Winman crashed into the ground with violent thuds.

From the time the woman had entered the training room, less than a minute had gone by.

Less than ten seconds had passed when Nightwing tried to call on the Titans to charge.

"Good job," the Celt said, the tiniest of smiles on her face.

The Titans groaned in pain.

"You barely passed."

"This was a test?" Raven heard Beast Boy groan as he separated himself from their gagging leader.

She was too busy trying to breathe to sit up.

"It was. Glynda will teach you this week, as promised. I would only act as an opponent. Until you passed."

"What was the test?" Laura asked.

"Make me use my magic, outperform me when I used lesser stats, or make me summon more than two spears. You barely passed the last one, but your teamwork was enough."

Raven felt the emotions of her teammates, the anger, pain, and helplessness as they realized exactly how much the woman had been holding back.

"Nightwing. You are the weakest but the most skilled. Learn to use your team like weapons, or you will fall behind." Starfire, you are the reverse. All power, very little skill. We will work on that. Beast Boy, you need to be more flexible. You simply tried to crush me with size rather than creativity." Raven could feel how the Celt's words impacted her friends as the woman walked her way. "Mercury, stop playing it safe. X-23, control yourself. Winman, you need basic conditioning. Without your board or armour, you were useless."

From her place on the ground, gasping for air, Raven saw Scathach lean over her. Unable to sense her emotions, the cambion was forced to judge her facial expression alone.

It was not a good one.

“And you,” Scathach said in a disappointed tone that bordered on disgust. “Your every action was tinged by fear. Either discard your fear or face it and overcome it. Or you will die.”

The woman stepped away, and Raven lay there, panting and trying to control her emotions.

“You only have one week,” Scathach said as she walked away. “I want everyone on their feet in five seconds. We will start with essential conditioning by running laps around the room. Yes, even you, Starfire. Mercury, you’re with Glynda.”

“How many laps?” Winman asked.

“Until I tell you to stop.” Raven was sitting up and facing the back of the woman, so she couldn’t see her face but judging by the emotions of her friends, it was not a reassuring sight.

“What about our duty?” Nightwing asked as he rose. “One or two must stay on watch, and we have patrols. We can’t spend a week just training and ignoring the city.”

Beast Boy and Winman looked at their leader in hope.

That hope was swiftly crushed.

“If anything happens, we’ll know,” Glynda answered for her fellow.

“So, you’ll be the heroes?” Starfire asked with sparkling eyes.

“No,” Scathach denied. “We’ll simply bring you to where there’s trouble. If you want to be heroes, learn to fight even when exhausted. Because if any of you go to bed without passing out, I have done my job wrong. Now run!”

At her last words, dozens of blood-red spears appeared above her shoulders and flew at them, tearing through where they had been if they hadn’t started to run.

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Batman only kept a tiny part of his attention on the training ground below and the earpiece that piped in sounds from his former protegee. He would go over everything in the training in more detail later, using the testimonies of the group and the footage of the cameras to get everything he could out of it.

Even without focusing on the outbreak of violence, what Batman saw threatened to tug his frowning face into a full scowl.

She was toying with them.

Scathach, if that was who she actually was, looked like she was dodging and evading easily. And she was, but Gotham's protector knew the Titans were unaware of how easily she was actually beating them.

From his vantage, it was evident to Batman how she controlled and regulated her abilities. When confronting Nightwing, she was slightly stronger and faster than an average thug. She used much more force when she threw Starfire than when hitting Beast Boy. But that same strength was less when duelling Logan's daughter.

The lancer was always slightly slower and weaker than whoever she was facing. She was making up the difference in attributes that she created with pure skill.

It was a display Batman would not have thought possible when he and Dick had set up this confrontation to probe the 'teachers' the Elden Lord would send.

He didn't believe the nonsense about fostering communication for a second. The Elden Lord was here for a reason.

Judging that he would learn nothing else for the moment, the Dark Knight focused wholly on the man beside him.

Tall, dark-haired, well-muscled, tan-skinned, wearing comfortable clothes. His face was passably handsome but not noteworthy. His only remarkable feature was his draconic eyes, and a pale blue ring on his left finger was the only odd article on his body.

He held himself with relaxed confidence as he gazed down through the window. His face was set in a soft smile, and his yellow-orange eyes looked at the fight with a warm fondness. When Scathach would score a hit, his lips would quirk into a proud smirk for a fraction of an instant.

Someone unaware would have thought he was a family man, looking at his wife with love and support.

Batman knew better.

This was but one of the Elden Lord's many masks.

The relaxed confidence belied a power that could destroy the world.

The soft smile hid a sadism that took pleasure in others' pain.

Those kind eyes watching the fight hid a mind that was, even now, learning more about the Titans than they were about his consorts.

Even his shadow, something Batman had been careful not to look at this entire time, hid a terrifying truth.

It was the latter that Batman suspected contained clues as to why they had chosen the Teen Titans for 'outreach'.

Raven was a common enough name. One who could manipulate shadows, or cast magic that made it look that way, was enough of a hint for Batman to make some

conjectures.

If Diana, why not someone else as well?

As Scathach started the training earnestly, the Elden Lord turned his full attention onto Batman.

"So," he asked with an amused tilt of his lips. "Why so serious?"

Batman allowed the scowl to form this time.

The humour was another of the beast's masks, one that reminded the man too much of the Joker for his comfort.

"What is your goal?" He asked rather than answer such a stupid question.

"Hm?" If anything, the Elden Lord looked even more amused than before. "If we're answering questions with more questions, you tell me. If someone has infinite power, limitless wealth, immortality, more fame than anyone else in the world and a family of beautiful women, what more would that man want out of life?"

More.

That was the easy and obvious answer. Those who had always wanted more.

More money, more power, more women, more everything.

But if the Elden Lord was like other megalomaniacs, Batman would not have been as frustrated as he was by the *thing* before him.

Even just standing next to it gave him a headache.

There was no denying he had power, but so far, 'Mikael' had barely used it. He made no grand gestures to take over the world or bind others to his will. He asked for nothing and seemed to move on a whim.

Baring his efforts to gain a human body, every other action he took had been precipitated by one of his 'consorts'.

Whether it be Ranni acting as his herald, 'Diana' rescuing the heroes of this world, or 'Scathach's' desire to teach, it looked like he was being tossed around by the desires of his 'family'.

Batman did not believe that for an instant.

There was no power without purpose.

Whether his power was genuinely endless or it was simply the bragging of an egomaniac, so far, the heroes of this world had found no common purpose in all the Elden Lord's actions.

But they still learned a lot.

Time to use what they knew to get more.

All this passed through Batman's head in less than a second as he evaluated his words and actions to try and leverage them to the desired outcome.

“I don’t buy it,” Batman said, turning to face the other man and narrowing his eyes. “Not this fake image you are showing others. Not your fake heroism. Not that fake embarrassment-blushing act you pulled yesterday. How many innocent lives did you end when you conquered those worlds with kindness? You have millions of lives on your hands. An ocean of blood at your feet. You might have left those worlds, but you left an incalculable amount of death behind. So I don’t buy your lies, and I will show everyone else that this is all a mask.”

Most of this information had come from Diana’s ‘insight’, something the Elden Lord claimed to have no control over. Either he was lying, or it was information he didn’t know they had.

Clark was willing to see the best in everyone, and Diana argued that death was inevitable in making worlds like Ranni’s a better place.

It was up to him to be the voice of reason to his friends.

When the Elden Lord thought he wasn’t being observed, he had gotten the greatest hints.

His manipulation of Amelia, Logan, and Charles in that graveyard had been a good hint of how he handled surprises and could grasp people’s weaknesses.

His appearance on ‘Priscilla’s’ stream gave away what sort of monster the Elden Lord really was. In less than a second, the man had gone from pretending to be a goofball to his ‘wife’ to a charming public speaker who had charmed an audience of tens of thousands with humour and wit.

If his humour reminded Batman of the Joker, then his separate personas reminded him of Two-face. Only controlled and bent to purpose.

The reason Batman tried to keep other heroes out of Gotham wasn’t some ego-driven desire for control. It was because he believed, in his heart of hearts, that other heroes would lose.

One only needed to look at the Red Queen to show that even the best heroes could be driven to extreme actions by the Joker in an afternoon. If the Clown ever focused on someone like Superman? Batman did not want to imagine what would happen to his friend.

The Elden Lord was just as cunning, chaotic, and manipulative as others that called his home city theirs. Only he wielded enormous power, had numerous allies, and was smart enough to play the long game.

Batman’s words of confrontation were to be used to expose him. He recorded everything from his cowl, sending the video to secure off-sight storage. Even if the Elden Lord did not outright admit to his manipulations or goals, whatever he said in denial

would be used to further build a profile that would eventually lead to his defeat.

"You're saying you don't believe me? That you'll bring everyone else to their senses about me?" The monster looked at him, emotion filling his face.

Surprise? Did he not think anyone would catch onto his lies? No, it wasn't a surprise, or at least entirely. Another mask?

"That's right." Batman asserted. "Whatever your goal, I will not allow you to succeed."

The Elden Lord raised a hand, and Batman tensed, ready to press the emergency request button in his glove and summon Superman and Wonder Woman from a nearby room.

But then the dragon in human form gently put it on his shoulder, and Batman could read the emotion in those draconic eyes.

Joy.

"Thank you." The fake man squeezed his shoulder gently. "You have no idea how much that means to me. I knew today was going to be a great day."

For less than a second, Batman was so genuinely confused that he almost let his bewilderment show on his face, but it passed as he realized what was going on.

Another persona! One set up to allay those suspicious of him. How deeply did this dragon's plans run?

"You know, I was pretty worried we wouldn't get along," Mikael said as he released the hero's shoulder. He still looked thrilled. "With you being all edgy and all. I mean, you have a sense of humour, but you aren't allowed to laugh. If you do, the world is destroyed and everything. But now I know we'll be great friends, Bruce."

Batman didn't flinch at the name.

"Oh, don't worry about secret identities or anything." The Elden Lord waived off his imaginary concern. Clark had thought he was paranoid when he claimed that name choice on the stream was anything less than a random coincidence. "Diana talked about her friends a lot, so I feel like I already know you quite well. I'm sure you already guessed we knew, but you don't have to worry about us spreading it around. I would hate to upset my wife. Happy wife, happy life. Your secret is safe with me. Wink wink."

Every word out of the beast's mouth served only to mock Batman, despite his kind and happy tone. He was flaunting his knowledge.

He held all the cards.

"I know you don't believe me, and you'll keep trying to prove otherwise, but I genuinely think we can get along. Heroes are a brave and superstitious lot," a paraphrase of something Batman had once thought to himself when designing his hero persona. How

did the Elden Lord know? “You’ll keep trying to find proof of some grand plan. Go ahead. Do you know the best way to get information? A guy’s night out! After this week, why don’t you and I and a few others go for drinks and pool? As you can imagine, I’m drowning in estrogen at home. You grill me on my evil plan, and I get some guy friends. It’ll be great!”

There it was. A clue!

Why the insistence on a week? Halloween? A spell, perhaps. Magic was an area Batman was limited in, but he was aware that certain holidays had unique properties.

“Why the Titans?” The world’s greatest detective pressed. He had the time of the crime, and now he needed a motive. That would lead him to the act itself.

“Believe it or not, I really do want to make them better heroes.” The fake persona would have fooled anyone else into believing the Elden Lord’s words. “I admire heroes and don’t want to see them die pointlessly. Especially the young. They have so much more Life left to live. By the end of the week, I guarantee they will be much better off than they are today.”

But he was the goddamn Batman!

“You’re mad if you think I’ll believe that.”

“Everyone is mad. It’s our unique madness that makes us what we are.” The Elden Lord smiled again as if making another joke, but Batman didn’t get this one. “Out of all the heroes in this world, you are the one I like the best. You are like me.”

“I am nothing like you!”

“You are,” the Elden Lord asserted. “The more you are suspicious of me, the more you investigate, analyze, and evaluate, the more you will find similarities. Except I’m prettier. And smarter. And have a successful love life. And a much better sense of humour. Anyway, the point is I think we can be great friends. I’ll be around for a while and need drinking buddies. The Family comes first, of course, but you can’t only hang out with your wives.”

Batman said nothing, staring the dragon in a human suit down.

“We’ll set it for next Saturday. Invite Supes along, will ya? I’ll see about getting a few others. Diana will love her husband and friends getting along.”

The Elden Lord stepped to the glass and stepped through it in a reminder of how untouchable he considered himself to be.

“I will stop you.” Batman reiterated, freezing the dragon for a moment. “Whatever your plan. We will stop you.”

“Great!” Mikael said with a laughing smile. “I love having enemies. Especially ones that I’m friends with.”

Still laughing to himself, he allowed himself to fall to the floor of the training room.

The Titans froze in their training as he approached with wide arms.

“There is a cost to your training!” Batman heard him declare through his earpiece, his voice still buoyant. He tensed, ready to bust through and aid his protegee’s team. “You must only address Scathach as Shishou! Anyone who fails to do so will be pranked mercilessly.”

There was a moment of confused silence as the Titans looked at each other in bewilderment, and Glynda put her face in her palms.

In a reenactment earlier in the lobby, Scathach smacked her husband gently on the back of the head.

“Did I say stop running?” Weapons filled the sky once more at her words.

“Can I have an autograph?” Beast Boy yelled at the Elden Lord as he ducked under a spear.

“I’m free next Saturday,” Clark said from his other earpiece.

If their talk had been a battle of wits, Batman couldn’t help but feel he had been defeated as readily as the Titans.

Author's Note:

I'm not gonna lie. This chapter fought me. A lot.

What to include. What to leave out. How to portray the characters. Mikael and Batman have a lot of similarities but just as many differences. I spent so much time struggling to get the words on the page that I didn't have time to do my usual edits, so apologies if this chapter feels a bit less polished.

Batman gets a lot of flack, some deservedly, and I'll be going a bit more into him in later parts, but, like how I've always tried to portray characters, there are parts to be admired and dismissed. Even my portrayal of characters is one of dozens of possibilities. Take from him and the Titans what you will.

I'm going to keep the note short today and wish you all a very Happy New Year, and I will see you all in 2023!

SIDE STORY V:
ALL HANDS ON DECK (ADULT)

I lose my cool when she steps in the room
And I get so excited just from her perfume
Electric eyes that you can't ignore
And passion burns you like never before
I was in search of a good time
Just running my game
Love was the furthest
Furthest from my mind
Caribbean Queen
Now we're sharing the same dream
And our hearts they beat as one
No more love on the run

The music was slow and sensual, like the woman in my arms.

My hands flowed over her body, teasing and fluttering. A delicate brush teased her with possibilities that hinted at future pleasure yet dangled it out of her reach.

I touched nothing inappropriate. My actions were almost chaste and prudish.

I was driving her absolutely wild.

In return, she tempted me with sexuality, with tactile physicality.

She pressed into me. The swell of her generous bust was like fire on my chest. Her nipples, separated from me by only two thin layers of cloth, felt like blades as they cut their way through my restraint with every movement. Her hips swayed, the movement matching mine but with extra sway, a lilt and roll only a woman of lythe beauty could pull off.

Every move of hers was the flutter of silk in the wind.

Or like a falling petal.

Nico Robin was sex on legs, and everyone around us knew it.

Her light purple dress covered everything necessary to be decent and left so much exposed that it drove me absolutely mad with tantalization.

I had seen more than one man trip over his feet while staring at her.

Not that I could blame them.

All seven women accompanying me were beautiful, dressed to kill, and moved with the confidence of women who had faced down the greatest heroes this world had to offer earlier today.

Ranni had attracted multiple odd looks with her blue skin and four arms, but she had

still been hit on no less than seven times in the four hours we had been touring various clubs and dance halls. The night was still young here in Sydney, and more than a dozen men or women had tried their luck with my Family only to be shot down.

Some were more brutal than others.

Yoruichi would tease the person good-naturedly before letting them down easily.

If they tried to hit on Melina, Tsunade, Medea, Glynda or Scathach, they would be firmly, but not unkindly, told they weren't available.

The worst was Robin.

She wouldn't say anything.

With her impressive height, she would just loom over most of the unlucky bastards with an expressionless face. Then there would be a few seconds of awkward silence. Then she would slowly and obviously, look the person up and down.

Then she would raise an eyebrow as if asking, 'really?' and turn back to the group without saying a word.

One guy had cried.

Yoruichi had fallen over laughing.

The night was still young, but Glynda and Scathach had decided to retire for the night. Melina and Ranni had used them as an excuse to leave as well, enjoying the dancing but not liking the crowds. I'd like to get a more private affair set up for them. Medea had also dipped out, returning to her hobby.

Robin had turned and was sensually grinding her delicious ass against me.

Soon it would be just Yoruichi and Tsunade.

Her arms snaked their way upwards, wrapping around my neck as I pulled her closer to me. One hand held her hips as the other butterflied its way across her abdomen as I leaned down to kiss her.

Our lips stayed together even as we continued to dance, the world fading away until it was just her, I, and the music.

It was an incredibly intense and intimate moment, neither of us saying a word, just revelling in each other's touch.

In being there together.

Robin will always have a special place in my heart.

Not only because she was the most like me in demeanour, thought process, and sense of humour, but also because she had been the first to appear in that cell in the Asylum.

In a very real way, Robin had been to me what the Straw Hats had been to her.

A spark of hope in the dark.

I connected so easily with her that it sometimes frightened me.

Our first time together had been less than a day after I had gotten my body back. I had joined her in the library, grabbed a book I hadn't finished, and layed out to relax on a nearby chair while she lay on the couch.

For over an hour, we had simply sat by each other, the sounds of pages turning the only noise in the room.

There had been a tension in the air then, and it had erupted without warning.

One moment, we were contently reading, and the next, she pulled my hair and scratched at my back as I slammed myself into her repeatedly.

And then it was over, and we went back to our books. She curled up to me on the couch since the chair was ruined.

Not a word had passed between us since I had walked in.

That was often how it was between us.

I, as a general rule, hated silence. I liked to talk, joke, and laugh. Even while reading, I want to listen to music. When things were silent around me, it meant I was too caught up in my thoughts.

Which was a bad thing.

There were precisely two times I liked silence.

When I was flying.

When Robin and I were reading together.

Barring Melina and Ranni, who had an unfair advantage, I can unequivocally say I was closest to Robin.

While some might decry me as playing favourites of loving one over the others, the Family and I understood the truth.

Some relationships progress faster than others. Some people just click easier.

Did it make my feelings for the others any less?

No.

It meant I needed to work harder to reach that level of understanding with them that Robin and I attained instinctively.

And I had eternity to do it.

Caught up in my feelings, memories, hopes for the future, and Robin, I didn't realize the music had shifted to a faster pace beat. The dancers around us had ceased their slow movements and were jumping, singing, and moving more frantically with the more upbeat tunes.

The former Pirate also didn't notice the change, holding me fast in her embrace.

We would have stayed there, dancing to a tune only we could hear and caught up in each other for hours if Yoruichi didn't take the opportunity to tease us.

The whistle, an honest to god catcall, rang loudly over the music.

It originated from below my feet, and the swish of a black tail danced at the edge of my vision.

“Get a room!” I heard her shout, though I couldn’t see her even as I whipped my head to the bar where she and Tsunade had been.

‘Had’ was the keyword.

They were long gone, likely to drink the city out of house and home.

One of these days, I was going to collar that cat.

Every eye had turned to us.

A few returned to their dancing or drinking, but a half dozen pairs of eyes remained locked on us.

We had been on international news not even a whole day ago.

I was honestly surprised we were so rarely identified. I chalked it up to most people not having caught the incident with Doomsday and its after-effects.

That anonymity, limited as it was, would fade in a matter of days.

“I found her,” Robin told me, one eye closed as she used her power. The other looked up at me, an electric blue that reminded me of the clear skies, and a wordless conversation passed between us.

She smirked, her hands crossing over her chest.

I didn’t need to ask to know that Yoruichi had just had a very bad time.

“She does have a point, though,” I said softly, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear. She let her power fade as I kissed my way up her collarbone and up her neck. Robin let out a throaty sound that drove me wild. “We plan to meet the Titans in less than ten hours. That’s barely enough time.”

“Time for what?” She asked breathily.

“Time for me to learn every inch of your body,” I said as my hands stopped their delicate dance along her form and grabbed two handfuls of her incredible ass. She groaned as I pressed my erection against her. “Intimately.”

She moaned in desire.

“Time for me to teach you what can’t be learned in a library,” I said as we ground into each other, heat overtaking us.

“I learned a lot in that library,” Robin chuckled as she nipped at my neck. She was one of a few in the Family who could reach that high.

“A quicky is nowhere near enough time to learn anything.” We were both panting with desire, practically dry-humping on the dance floor and giving the onlookers a show they wouldn’t soon forget.

“Hmm,” the former pirate hummed sensually, continuing to writhe in my hands. “Teach me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I’ll learn.”

I froze, my hands stopping their exploration as I looked down into electric blue eyes in disbelief.

“Did you just quote Benjamin Franklin as dirty talk?” I asked.

“I did,” Robin smiled up at me impishly.

My booming laughter was even louder than the whistle had been, but I couldn’t help it.

The raw heat between us faded slightly as I roared with laughter, and she giggled behind a hand. Replacing it was a sense of comradery. If she or I had done something like that with anyone else in the Family, they would not have recognized the quote for the joke it was.

God, I loved this woman.

It was probably for the best we cooled it for the moment. I had been seconds away from tearing Robin’s dress from her body and having my way with her on the dance floor.

Exhibitionism wasn’t one of my fetishes, but I wasn’t opposed to it either. We both would have enjoyed giving the world a different kind of show than the one we had given the heroes earlier.

It would have cost me the gravitas I had built up, which would have been a shame.

“Let’s go,” I said as I leaned down to peck her on the lips once my laughter had faded. I used the chance to concentrate, maximizing my focus and carefully dredging up my power.

This was my first time casting the spell with a companion, and I would rather not smear us across the space-time continuum.

After a few seconds of making out, our forms began to shimmer in pale blue starlight.

Three seconds later, we had disappeared from the dance floor to appear at the entrance to the master bedroom at the Mansion.

“That’s a new trick,” Robin said as we separated.

“A bit of a mishap earlier told me I should look into other teleportation options than just relying on Raven,” I said with a shrug. I had seen Ranni use the spell a few times but had yet to have the chance to officially learn it since she had been limited by her doll body in Elden Ring. I had spent a few hours learning it from her earlier today. “I’ll learn an imitation of Medea’s teleportation later too. It’s faster.”

The newly risen sun shone on my bed as I opened the door to my room.

I had barely opened the door before I was pushed from behind with considerable strength.

Robin chuckled lowly as I flew across the room and landed sprawled on the bed.

"I need to get ready," she said as I sat up. Before I could get off the bed and undress, two forms appeared beside me and held me down.

"Don't worry." The Robin on my left said as she started to unbutton my shirt.

"We'll keep you company." The Robin on my left continued, working on removing my pants.

Both of them were only copies from the waist up but the four naked breasts, topped with perky pink nipples, provided more than enough reason to not feel weirded out by the uncanny display.

"Have fun," Robin said as she sashayed out of my room, her hips swaying in an almost hypnotic movement.

You hate to see them leave but love to watch them walk away.

Of course, I could only focus on her sexy exit for a moment before the two clones completely undressed me.

The haze of lust that had temporarily left us with Robin's joke earlier redescended as two pairs of eyes watched my throbbing erection hungrily.

I, in turn, felt my pulse quicken as each of the clones made from the Hana Hana no Mi pressed a silky smooth hand against my turbid length. Unsurprisingly, they moved with perfect synchronicity up and down my length.

"Oh my," Right-Robin gasped, her empty hand covering her mouth in feigned surprise even as her other one continued to jack me off. "How did this fit into me?"

"Our husband is quite the brute," Left-Robin replied as if they weren't the exact same person in different bodies. She leaned her cheek on her other hand, looking up at me in fake fear. "Whatever shall we do when he slakes his ravenous lust on our poor body?"

I didn't need Sticky Fingers to know she was asking for it.

Grabbing the left clone's head, I was about to drive her snarky mouth down onto my dick when she dissolved into flower petals in my hand.

"How violent," Left-Robin said teasingly as she reformed on my side, her hand re-joining the other clones' in massaging my length.

I narrowed my eyes.

While the dual handjob felt nice, I was panting from lust after this evening and her teasing. I also wasn't one to beg, even in the bedroom, nor was I someone who enjoyed being passive or submissive regarding sex.

If she kept this teasing up, I would get… creative.

"I wanted to try something," Left-Robin explained, perhaps sensing my intent. Both hands stopped their motions and grabbed me at my base, holding me fast, so my erection

stood straight up.

Then, the Robin clone on my right placed her unoccupied hand flat over my tip.

From her empty palm, a mouth formed, tongue dashing out to lick me.

“Hm,” Robin hummed contemplatively. “The catalogue makes you taste good.” She lowered her hand slightly, the mouth closing around my tip to suckle and lick lightly. “I’ve been interested in experimenting with my Devil Fruit like this for a while. Ever since we talked to Amelia. I’ve had some wonderfully fun ideas.”

Slowly, ever so agonizingly slowly, the hand lowered. My dick disappeared into that mouth millimetres at a time.

“This little trick, for example,” she purred in my ear. “I can grow my mouth wherever I want, even in your pants. You could be doing absolutely anything, and I could be in the mood. I could be swallowing your dick while you were in a meeting, and nobody would know. And,” Robin breathed deeply, caught up in her fantasy, as her hand lowered. Less than two inches had disappeared. “I might not use my mouth.”

She was still teasing me.

That wouldn’t do.

I had watched over the Dream for the entire time the women had been on the Island. I knew precisely how their powers had evolved as they ascended tiers from consuming my blood.

Robin had seen the most significant change.

She had started at T5, the weakest of those summoned. Her ascension had been focused on unlocking her Conqueror Haki and allowing her to multi-task with her Devil Fruit to an absurd degree. That was how she could give me this hand/blowjob while still talking.

One of her most significant weaknesses, the fact that everything done to her sprouted limbs reflected back onto her physical body, had been negated once she became Tier 7.

But just as I knew where she had improved, I also knew where she was still lacking.

“I would welcome you into me.” Left-Robin continued to whisper into my ears as her clone lowered her hand the barest fraction of an inch. “Anytime. Anywhere. My womb woul-”

Her words were cut off as my hand, stealthily moving downwards, got close enough to grab her wrist.

In one fluid and fast motion, I yanked the hand down until her fingers and palm were pressed flush against my groin.

“Aghk,” Robin choked at the sensation.

It used to be that if someone cut one of her summoned hands, the cut would be

replicated on the real Robin. Now? She would only feel the pain of being cut but would have no wound.

The tight, wet, and warm throat surrounding my dick was only a conjuration of the Devil Fruit. Her actual throat remained unblocked and unchanged.

To Robin?

She felt every inch of my shaft carve its way down.

Robin hadn't been just going slow to tease me. It was also because this was her first blowjob, and she was not used to the sensation, even if she didn't have to worry about the lack of air that most women faced.

What I did was introduce her to no-risk deepthroating in one deep thrust.

She gasped as I quickly raised her hand back up.

"Glurk!" Robin choked on air as I lowered it down again just as quickly. "Ack! Urk! Glark! Slurp!"

To be honest, watching the clone of Nico Robin choke on empty air as I used her mouth like a sex toy would have been somewhat amusing if I was in any mind to tease her about it.

But I was focused on the feeling of her mouth, tongue, and throat.

I had been teased and tormented by seven beautiful women for hours, some deliberately, others purely accidentally. A crescendo had been building, and I was ready for a release.

Just because I could withhold my orgasm forever didn't mean I wanted to.

I stopped the clone's choking sounds when I roughly pulled her head up for a blazing kiss as I held the hand against my skin.

Robin shook as she felt me spasm my release down a throat that didn't exist. She tried to pull away, but I held her firm as I blew load after load down her throat.

As my orgasm petered out, I let go of Right-Robin's arm and Left-Robin's head.

The one on my left almost instantly dissolved into pink petals and didn't reform.

The one on my right remained where she was, eyes glazed and unfocused. A bit of drool and possibly cum, dribbled out of her jaw.

It was her throat I had just been ravaging.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

I lifted the hand still pressed against my groin and used the mouth attached to clean myself off.

"How… violent," a sultry voice said from my doorway.

Looking up, I saw why Robin had needed to step out. There was no way she could have been wearing *that* under her dress.

She was a study in black and white. Robin's alabaster skin contrasted with the dark lace that covered her form. Her long, sensual legs were garbed in black stockings. More black lace was used as a garter belt to hold them in place and accentuate a waist covered in panties that might as well have been painted on.

Robin's prodigious breasts were covered in a bra that hid nothing, pink nipples acting as a splash of colour on the monochrome.

Her electric blue eyes were as unfocused as her clone's had been, and she held a hand up to her mouth even as she leaned against the doorway on unsteady legs.

"To be so rough," she whispered to herself, and I noticed her body shudder.

Even if I couldn't go literally forever, there wasn't a straight man in the world who wouldn't have gotten hard again at the sight of Nico Robin posing in lingerie in their doorway.

I let out a draconic growl, low and rumbling, as I stood from the bed and stalked my way to her. I reached her and grabbed her by the hips, hands pressed against the lace.

That shook her from her daze.

"I do believe I have learned something already," Robin said, looking up at me with a sly smile.

"And what is that," I rumbled.

"Why I never enjoyed female company as much as some of the others do," she said, pressing herself against me. I could feel the dampness of her panties against my erection. "There is just something so… solid, reliable, and rough in your form that the others lack." As Robin talked, her hands roamed around my torso, my arms, and my dick. "I do believe I have sthenolagnia. How curious."

I blinked down at her before mentally shrugging.

A muscle fetish wasn't even that strange. Good on her for finding out more about her preferences.

I wasn't a bodybuilder and never had been.

I had been in shape in my old life, exercising regularly for health benefits, but I never saw the need to waste so much time at the gym. When I had *Amelia/Shaper* create my body, I modelled it on my Elden Ring form. Not only because it was what the blood was from but also because it was the one I had spent the most time in. Thus my extra height as I gained more power and consumed more dragon hearts.

My muscles had been forged by long rides on Torrent, wearing heavy armour for decades and for swinging around massive slabs of metal and carving through bodies.

My body wasn't made for display, to brag about in gyms or to seduce people.

It was built for war.

That didn't mean I couldn't use them for this.

Robin could contemplate the implications of her new fetish later when she wasn't so aroused she couldn't stand straight.

Right now, I had pirate booty to plunder.

"Ah," Robin gasped as I picked her up at the waist.

To be honest, she wasn't heavy in the least to me, but I did go through the effort to flex my muscles under her hands. I also used a minor application of Priscilla's size-changing spell to give myself a few more inches of height, so I towered over her by at least a foot.

Since Robin was six foot two, that put me well over the seven-foot mark.

Then I carried her to the bed.

Slowly.

I dragged out the manhandling, the show of strength and control, of dominant power.

When I had picked her up, she had been wet and wide-eyed.

When I set her on the bed ten seconds later, she was panting and positively gushing.

"Wha," Robin looked up at me, her pupils so dilated in desire that the blue had almost been swallowed by the black. "What now?" She rasped from a dry throat, even as she liked her lips in lust.

"Now?" I asked rhetorically as I grabbed each of her arms and held them aloft with one hand. She hung there, ass off the bed, as I held her. The only limbs she could move were her legs, and even those were halted when I placed one of my enlarged hands on her hips to hold her in place.

Nico Robin was utterly at my mercy.

The seductress of earlier, the tease who had driven me wild, was no more.

The image of womanly grace, sophistication and refined beauty was gone.

What had replaced her was a beautiful woman indulging in a newly discovered fetish.

"Now," I said as one of my fingers pulled the front of her soaked panties aside, revealing the sopping core beneath. "You are Mine!"

I drove myself into her.

She came undone.

Moaning and thrashing, her head tilted back as her body undulated in my grasp. Robin's arms remained firmly in place, as did her waist, but her legs spasmed and writhed before wrapping themselves around me, holding me deep in her.

I didn't let her orgasm stop me.

Even as Robin's legs tried to lock me into place, I ignored their feeble strength to withdraw and thrust again. The force of my movement sent her massive breasts jiggling

free of their lacy confines.

Artoria had been so inexperienced that, despite her greater strength, I had played her like an instrument. I imagine any future intimacy would be more back-and-forth than it had been that night.

Ranni had been incredibly willing and craved any sort of stimulation on top of being a virgin. She got off on literally everything I did.

Robin was someone whose button I found and hammered like I was panic-rolling from Ornstein and Smough.

Sticky Fingers helped make sure that my every move, every part of my body language, further emphasized my strength. I not only towered over Robin, and held her in place, but I also controlled the pace.

Just as when I carried her to the bed, I moved slowly and deliberately. I withdrew slowly, ensuring a flat pace even as her legs tried their best to lock me within her. I felt every bump and ridge of her velvety insides, and I made sure to carve my shape into her. When I slammed back into her, I did it with enough force to send her breasts and ass jiggling.

There was no subtlety in this. No seduction. No elegance.

I was a tower of muscle and strength, and I used that power to have my way with her at my own pace.

There was nothing Robin could do about it.

Robin was too weak.

Robin *loved* it.

My pace remained constant, and my hands were firmly in place, but the bouncing tits in front of my eyes also demanded attention.

I leaned down, much more than I usually would have, and caught a bouncing breast with my mouth, my teeth lightly scratching at her nipple.

“AAAHHHH!” Robin howled, her voice cracking as her most explosive orgasm yet shook her. Her insides undulated along my length, trying to milk me for all my worth.

I did not stop.

I maintained the same solid and steady rhythm as she writhed and thrashed. Her breast fell from my mouth, but I simply reached down and bit the one I had neglected.

I continued for half a minute as Robin rode her orgasm to its end. I was starting to feel the pleasure building up again, and instinct and desire wanted me to raise my pace, but I controlled myself.

The after-effects were still fading, minor spasms rocking Robin’s form when she remembered her Devil Fruit.

Arms, half a dozen of them, sprouted along my body.

For a second, I feared I would have to put some effort into this show of strength.

I underestimated how much Robin wanted to explore this new discovery of hers.

Rather than use her powers to try and free herself from my domination, Robin's limbs started to caress me. Focusing on areas of dense muscles, such as my shoulders, thighs, arms and chest, her arms fondled, squeezed, rubbed, and massaged my body. Sometimes mouths would form on the palms of her hands, and she would lick or kiss a particularly taut muscle.

I had been worshiped before as my time in the Lands Between drew to a close.

I hated it with a passion. Any sort of blind faith made me disgusted. I had only been able to stomach their fawning because it served the purpose of my plan to escape.

This form of worship, so intimate and sensual, I could get behind. It did wonders for my ego.

A hand fondled my balls, four more massaged my shoulders, two mouths nibbled at my pecks, and a tongue was dragged along my abbs.

But all good things must end, even if I still had hours to go before meeting with the Titans. And there was a lot I wanted to do with Robin.

After minutes more of this strength play, even my steady pace brought me to the edge.

With an animalistic growl, I slammed myself hilt deep into Nico Robin one last time.

"MMMMMHHHHHHH," She moaned as my scalding cum blasted into her warm, waiting core. This set off another of her climaxes, one I let ride as I was caught up in the pleasure of my own release.

I continued to hold her in place even as my orgasm finished. Shrinking back to my regular size, I sat on the bed and pulled her close through the last throes of her own climax.

If it wasn't for the Catalogue, I would be genuinely worried about how easy it was to get these women to orgasm. My previous lovers had been nowhere near this responsive, and even then, we still had to deal with chaffing, soreness, and dehydration.

Sex magic for the win.

"Well," Robin said, still panting but lucid. "That was informative."

"I would hope so," I replied with a chuckle.

"Now," she continued as she stood up. Robin moved with the fluid grace she usually did, unlike the animalistic thrashing from earlier. Turning to me, still clad in her black lace lingerie, she kneeled between my legs. "Onto the next lesson."

Two more clones of her grew from the bed on either side of me, and all three pressed their naked breasts against my still-hard dick. They began moving up and down in perfect

sync, rubbing their breasts and nipples against me and each other.

“Was my enhanced breast sensitivity due to the situation, or are they naturally like that?” Robin said with a sly smile, looking up at me with eyes still darkened with lust even as she hefted her massive mammaries.

“You are the image of a dedicated scholar, my dear,” I said with a chuckle as I lay back and let the three versions of Nico Robin go to town under my watchful eye.

Today was going to be a good day. I could feel it

Author's Note:

We ring in the new year with my third sex scene.
I had always planned on Robin's first scene being one of the early ones due to how compatible she is with Mikael, but I was surprised at how easily Robin's character fell into place for this one. Every scene should be slightly different, not only to fit the characters' personalities but also so I can experiment with what works for me. Fair warning, the next one will be my most ambitious one to date.

I've decided I like this format, where I put side stories and smut in the middle of a Part as a break from the main story chapters. A sort of downtime before the ramp-up to the end of the arc. Expect a few more SS and at least one more sex scene before we resume with Furlough.

I hope 2023 has gotten off to a great start for everyone, and I will see you all next week.

PS: Pull up a chair, lads. Let old uncle Reading teach a lesson of his own.

I have gotten more than a few questions regarding the sexuality of the women, especially how some people seem to really hate how some got together. That is absurd.

So here is how I see them. This is either how they were portrayed in canon or as a result of actions taken in this fic.

Diana: Demisexual (Canon)

Emma: Mikael-sexual (As she is now, she is whatever he wants her to be.)

Raven: Heterosexual (Canon)

Tsunade: Bisexual (Prefers men but wouldn't kick a woman out of bed. Canonically, she was only with one man, with hints of one or two more. But Naruto Lore is weird, so this is how I read it. She is the biggest reach I feel, but she does have her reasons I'll get into later.)

Robin: Heterosexual (Experimented with Tsunade and Yoruichi, but it didn't really do much for her.)

Yoruichi: Demisexual (My reading of canon since she is never officially with anyone but her actions hint in this regard.)

Glynda: Pansexual (Originally Hetero before learning the Way of Thighs from Scathach)

Medea: Bisexual (Canon)

Artoria: Bisexual (Canon, but prefers men)

Scathach: Pansexual (Canon… Celts are weird)

Priscilla: Heterosexual? (Has no sexual experience, so cannot judge her preferences yet. She is still totally Yan for Mikael, so hetero for now. We'll see how her character develops.)

Ranni: Demisexual (Canon. She doesn't care if the Tarnished is male or female when they become her consort.)

Melina: Heterosexual (There is so little known about her in Elden Ring that I am solely

basing this on the fic.)

That's the list for those curious. Sexuality can change from person to person and evolve over time as people find new things to like or dislike. Robin experimented with the female form and decided it wasn't for her. Glynda tried it and found she enjoyed it.

Learn what you like, experiment a little, and don't judge others for their preferences. Everyone is different. The internet is large enough to accommodate everyone, and fanfiction is the perfect example. I'm sure you can find something to your taste.

Class dismissed.

SIDE STORY VI:
MEETINGS, MINDS AND MYSTERIES

'Cause what she's doin' now is tearin' me apart
Fillin' up my mind and emptying my heart
I can hear her call each time the cold wind blows
And I wonder if she knows what she's doin' now

Taylor drummed her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel of her car.

She'd been stuck in traffic for the last fifty minutes, barely inching her way forward as the sun descended from late afternoon till full twilight. Only the barest hints of natural light reflected off the buildings, most illumination coming from the streetlamps of Brockton Bay and the other cars around her.

She took their honking as a sign they were all as impatient as her. But there was nothing they could do. They should know by now that they were lucky that the danger had already passed.

An entire stretch of nearby road had been destroyed by a villain, who Taylor didn't know, but she had seen the usual 'Super Fight Scene' signs for the last half hour. She hoped no one was hurt, but she refused to check out her phone.

Where on earth were the heroes? Or the cleanup crews?

She had shuffled through the radio for any update on the situation, but all the news outlets had been raving about some new Super incident in Ohio. Giving it up as a bad job, she had turned it off and spent most of her time thinking about how she would write her upcoming essay on William Blake's Lamb.

There was a time, years ago, when the news of a Super fight nearby, or the one making the national news over in Ohio, would have piqued her interest.

Back when she wore Armsmaster panties, went as Wonder Woman for Halloween, and had a Flash brand lunchbox.

That was before she discovered she was a mutant with a useless power.

Before she understood the fear of losing everything to a stray shot from a blaster.

Before her dad died, collateral damage to a fight between Typhoid Mary and the Scarlet Spider. No rhyme or reason, just the wrong place at the wrong time.

Now she kept her head down, avoiding Supers and anything to do with them as much as possible.

Taylor Hebert was one of the millions worldwide who won and lost the genetic lottery.

In a world where one in ten thousand people have an ability of some sort, and the number rising every day, it was almost guaranteed you'd run into a Super at least once a week.

Most of them were less dangerous than a thug with a bat.

For every pyro that could destroy a building in one blast, thousands could barely light a match. Every flyer that could reach Mach speeds overshadowed the countless others who could only hover. Strongmen able to lift a car were much rarer than those who could lift a couch.

In a world where more and more people had powers, either from mutation, triggering, science, or extraterrestrial origin, only a handful had abilities that allowed them to make a difference.

The sheer population of the earth ensured that there were still thousands of people who had 'Super' superpowers, but most were like Taylor.

Underpowered.

A term the internet had coined that fit her to a T.

Her only ability was immunity from psychic influence.

She had gone the first fifteen years of her life not knowing she had it, and since discovering it, it had not proven useful once.

It was only when the X-men, and the Xavier Institute, went public after joining the fight against Behemoth that Taylor learned that mutants were a separate classification of Supers.

If her power had been more practical, she might have pursued further education at the Institute or gotten an apprenticeship.

She could have been a hero.

Then she might have been able to save her dad.

Taylor wasn't bitter, more like wistful.

If that had happened, she would have had to leave Emma, even if only for a little while, until she got her power under control. Both of them would have hated that.

Their relationship might not have survived.

Still…

Taylor Hebert spent the remaining drive, twenty minutes to cross the two blocks to home, caught up in her mind.

Not about a long-dead poet but about what could have been.

Parking the car, Taylor picked up the package left on the doorstep and entered. Judging by the size, no bigger than her hand, Emma might have received new make-up samples again. Companies often sent her some of their product when she advertised for

them.

Emma was in the living room, a news broadcaster's voice barely a murmur from this distance.

Some Super incident, probably. That was all the news talked about these days.

"I'm home," Taylor called out as she set her heavy bag down with a sigh of relief. The package was put on the table.

It was surprisingly addressed to her.

There was no return address.

"You're late. I was worried." Emma called back.

Grabbing a pair of scissors, Taylor cut it open gently.

"Some Super incident on the road. The heroes were taking forever to show up, so it was bumper to bumper."

Inside was a black cloth pouch and a small white card.

"I'm not surprised," Taylor heard her fiancee snort. "The whole world went mad for like an hour. Huge Super throwdown through a bunch of states and ended up near Washington. Did you hear about it?"

Fliping opens the card, Taylor read it even as she answered Emma absentmindedly.

"Something about a mutant in Clevland, right?"

'With my condolences for your loss and wishing you a happy ever after.

Mikael, Drakon Inc'

Taylor frowned at the card in confusion. The name was unfamiliar, but the company sounded familiar for some reason.

It took her a moment to place it.

The tall blonde last week!

The one who had been asking about her dad.

Danny Hebert had been well-connected and friendly, so it hadn't been rare for people to stop by asking about him, but she had stood out because of how attractive Taylor had found her and the fact it had been over a year since his death.

So this Mikael was her boss? Odd that he hadn't included a last name.

"Turns out it was an alien. It was pretty scary. It kept getting stronger and stronger as it rampaged. Mutating and changing. The League, Avengers, X-men, and a bunch of the Protectorate showed up to try and stop it. It was kicking their asses."

"What happened?" Taylor asked as she picked up the pouch.

Emma would have a much different tone if any of her favourite heroes died, so she assumed they won in the end.

The cloth of the pouch was silky smooth, unlike any material she was familiar with.

Definitely not cheap.

Pulling the strings open and upending the contents onto her hand gently, Taylor blinked in surprise as a small sculpture fell out.

It was an insect of some sort, made of glass to glitter like multi-coloured gems. A beetle? It didn't look right for that. But it was familiar.

Taylor Hebert wasn't an insect expert by any measure, so it took her a few seconds to identify the palm-sized figure as a scarab. Like one she saw in Egyptian design.

Why would a CEO send her a glass scarab?

"The Elden Lord, you know, the huge dragon that nommed on the Simurgh, got a human body and brought Glory Girl back from the dead," Emma rambled.

Taylor rolled her eyes.

Just because she didn't actively seek out info on Supers anymore didn't mean she had been living under a rock. She hadn't seen the famous video of Panacea Park, but she had heard retellings enough to get the gist.

All that had been impossible to miss even if she didn't watch the news or go to forums.

"Anyway. It turns out he married some sort of extradimensional clone of Wonder Woman, and she came to help. With King Arthur. Who, it turns out, is a girl. A hot one. She's the one from the Panacea video."

Taylor turned her attention from the small scarab in her hand to look at the living room in disbelief.

"What." Taylor made her way to the living room, her voice flat in deadpan.

In what possible world did those strings of words make any sense?

Supers were always weird, but what Emma said was some absurd, next-level shit.

"So these two come in, rescue the heroes and kicking this thing's ass using a bunch of funky weapons. Only nothing seems to put it down." As Taylor entered the room, Emma stood to give her a hug and a quick peck on the cheek before quickly refocusing on the TV. "The Elden Lord shows up, says a few words to the New Wonder Woman and gives her a sword. She kills the thing dead. You'd think that would be it. But then a whole bunch of other women show up. There's, like, ten of them plus the Elden Lord. And they're all married or something, and they're staring down the heroes. One turns into a dragon and flies off to fix all the destroyed stuff. Another one grows this huge golden tree. I mean massive. I could see it from the window. Did you?"

"No," Taylor said with a shake of her head. She must have been facing the wrong way when it happened. As her childhood friend rambled on, she felt the headache that had disappeared earlier make its way back. Whenever Emma got on one of her tirades, it was

better to let her get it all out than try to stop her.

She seemed particularly energetic tonight.

“So this tree heals everyone for, like, five hundred miles and then everyone is in this big standoff. It turns out the Elden Lord is pretty cool, but because the heroes have been scared, they’ve been hounding him while he spends time with his family. They talk, Superman apologizes, and some people try and steal his weapons, only he goes ‘Nuh-uh’ and catches them all. Then he summons these two dragon heads, blasts the alien’s corpse to pieces and leaves with most of the other women. King Arthur and the new Wonder Woman stay behind.”

“Okay,” Taylor nodded, showing she had followed along. Maybe this would all make sense if she watched what had happened.

This time alone, she’d go out of her way to actually look things up, even if only to find out what was up with the massive dragon off the coast, the blue moon in the sky, and this gigantic tree.

It all sounded insane, and Taylor felt a sense of vertigo.

Every day, more and more incidents, attacks, or disasters appear. It was one of the reasons she stopped watching the Super scene.

It was just depressing.

And now this.

Was it wrong to want a quiet, happy life?

“Anyway, how was your day?” Emma asked, finally running out of steam.

“Fine,” Taylor said with a shrug. “Midterms, you know. Do you remember that woman? Glynda?”

“Glynda Goodwitch? The dragon?” Emma asked in turn, looking confused.

“What?” Taylor asked, bamboozled. “No, the blonde from last week. The one asking after my dad for her boss?”

“It’s ringing a bell, but I can’t remember the details. Did you tell me about it already? Was I home?”

“You were the one who answered the door,” Taylor said with a sigh. Sometime she could be such an airhead. “Anyway, what does the Wizard of Oz have to do with dragons?”

“Nothing,” Emma shook her head with an amused smile. “That was one of the women with the Elden Lord. The one that turned into a dragon was named Glynda Goodwitch. I thought it was a joke, but she is seriously powerful. That’s what’s on,” she nodded to the TV. “She flew over Clevland and repaired everything. Like a tenth of the city was wrecked, and then: poof. All better. She couldn’t do anything about the people who died, but the

city was repaired, and the tree healed everyone else."

"Good for them," Taylor said, feeling sympathy for the inhabitants.

On the one hand, it was Ohio, so they were used to getting a bad hand. On the other, as someone from Brockton Bay, she would appreciate it if, after a disaster, someone came and cleaned everything up for them as well.

It would make the commute much more manageable.

Shaking her head slightly at her joke, Taylor lifted the glass scarab to show her fiancee.

"Ooooh, pretty," Emma cooed at the sight of the light bouncing off the figurine. She took the fake insect in her hand, rubbing her fingers over it.

"Mikael, her boss, sent this with his condolences," Taylor said as Emma froze. "But why a glass scarab?"

"What did you say his name was?"

"Hm? Mikael. From Drakon Inc." Emma's eye twitched. "There was no last name, which is weird."

"Taylor, dear, I love you," Emma said slowly and patiently, like talking to a stupid person.

"Thank you," Taylor answered, looking at the redhead in confusion. "I love you too."

"But you need to listen to me!" Emma nearly shouted. "It's okay if you don't want to deal with Supers. I get it. But when I talk about the dragon the size of a continent that was in town last week and brought someone back from the dead! You. Need. To. Listen!"

"Woah," Taylor said, raising her hands in surrender as she stepped back from Emma. "What's wrong?"

The blonde was right.

When Emma had been talking about the famous footage of Glory Girl's return, Taylor had been too distracted by the idea of the dead coming back to life.

Could she have her parents back?

Could she see them again? Hold them? Tell them all the words that went unsaid?

Eventually, she snapped out of her funk as reality settled. Not only were there probably a bunch of conditions for bringing people back, but why would someone like the Elden Lord care about poor orphaned Taylor Hebert?

Everyone had lost loved ones.

That's just how it was in a world full of Supers.

She was no one special, and she had nothing to offer.

For the last week, she had tried to put the thought out of her mind.

"What's wrong?" Emma repeated rhetorically, sounding near hysterics. "What's wrong

is that Mikael is the Elden Lord's name! What's wrong is that a blonde called Glynda was here last week! What's wrong is we were given a gift from the CEO of a fake company, whose name is a shitty pun! That's what's wrong!"

"What?" Taylor asked, struggling to understand but getting the gist.

"Quick!" Emma said, pulling up her phone and scrolling through it at a blistering pace. "Is this her? The woman from last week?"

The image on the screen was a tall blonde with green eyes in a blouse and skirt combo standing in front of a wooden chair. Nearby, other attractive women filled similar chairs. Behind them, a massive grey and white carcass and a man sitting atop it.

"That's her," Taylor said softly, her mouth suddenly dry.

Emma Barnes let out a low keening sound from her throat as she held up the scarab to the light.

"You don't think…" Taylor Hebert hesitated even to voice the idea. "That's not a real gem, right? Right?"

Emma choked.

******

As Nico Robin walked the dirt road, backpack slung over her shoulder, she revelled not in the view of the Mediterranean sea glittering in the setting sun as it descended but in the feeling of her body.

She was familiar with soreness from training. Soreness from exhaustion. From bruises or pulled muscles. Those hurt, but she was long used to pain.

The soreness that still tingled through Robin's body was a pleasant one.

Not one part of her didn't ache deliciously after last night, even if her body did not have any actual marks.

As Mikael had promised, he had spent hours exploring her body. It was fantastic.

And so new.

Even now, the phantom sensation of his hands, his tongue, or other parts of him sent trills of ghostly pleasure along her nerves. She was half tempted to go through with her threat of sprouting a part of herself in his pants right now.

She shook her head in denial.

Not only was he on the other side of the globe, but his meeting with the Titans was not the time to experiment with that aspect of her powers.

Still…

Robin had thought that over six hours of passionate, experimental and kinky sex

would be excessive, but now she knew it was barely enough.

The only reason the pair finally separated was that Mikael had to meet the Teen Titans.

To shake herself out of the feeling of emptiness his departure had brought, Robin had showered and set off to continue her little adventure.

This world did not have the Void Century, nor did it have Poneglyphs to search out. Until The Family travelled to a world similar to her home, her dream was put on hold.

For now.

Able to read all the writings of this world, thanks to the Catalogue, most archeology came pretty quickly to her. It was a very well-defined field of study here, unlike her home, so there was no central mystery of the world that attracted her attention.

Except for one she had discovered by chance while they had been settling down and evaluating this world for risks.

Atlantis.

So here Robin was, walking along a dirt road on a small island off the coast of Croatia.

The small house on the nearby hill was her destination.

A black and white dog barked a few times as she approached. Its tail wagged happily as Robin drew closer. Paying the appropriate tribute, she scratched it behind its ears, much to its joy.

“Can I help you?” An older man asked in Croatian from his place in the doorway. He was well past his prime but still fit enough to stand, and he eyed her warily.

“Dr. Jakov Vukelic?” Robin asked in the same language. She didn’t even have an accent. “Former professor at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin?”

If one ignored the sexual slavery aspect, every aspect of the Waifu Catalogue could be considered a very useful superpower by itself. Many would cut off a limb for the ability to read, write, and speak every conceivable language.

“I am he,” the old scholar nodded, looking less wary and more intrigued. “May I have your name, miss?”

“Nico Robin,” she said as she left the dog. “I am an archeologist. Do you have a moment to talk about your work?”

“Of course,” the balding man’s eyes lit up with joy as he waved her in. “Come in, come in. I always welcome fellow scholars. Would you like something to drink? I have tea, coffee, or something a little stronger if you prefer?”

“Some coffee if it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” Robin said with a smile as she stepped into the modest house.

It was clean, with sturdy, well-made furniture and a half dozen bookshelves filled with hundreds of books—enough room for one man to live out his retirement days in peace and study. The nearby town was far enough not to disturb him but close enough that he could get there with little effort for supplies.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Dr. Vukelic said as he busied himself with making her drink. “Please have a seat.”

“Thank you,” Robin sat in one of the plush chairs, eyeing the books with evaluating eyes. “You are a hard man to contact, doctor.”

“Jakov, please,” he said with an amiable smile. “I apologize for that, but I am retired and have been for years. I’m not too fond of all this technology, phones, computers, and the like. If my old colleagues need me, they can send me a letter.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why did you retire so young?”

“Ah,” the old Croatian looked slightly hurt as he set a cup of coffee in front of her and settled into his chair. “It is sad when a line of study one has dedicated their life to ceases to be of interest to others. The wall’s fall was just a good excuse to take my leave and pursue my studies independently.”

“Truly?” Robin asked in surprise. “I had known there were few scholars on Atlantis, but for no one to be interested? I believe you were, and still are, the premier scholar of Atlantian civilization.”

“It is easy to be the best scholar of a subject most believe to be a hoax.” There was a note of pain in the older man’s voice, but he shook his head. “Nevertheless, I started this pursuit because of my curiosity, not for fame. I wish to know the truth. Whether people believe it or not is their matter.” The stubborn pride in the former professor told Robin this was an old wound long scarred over.

“I believe you,” Robin smiled at Jakov over her coffee. “That is what I am here for. The truth of Atlantis.”

“What would you like to know?” He leaned forward eagerly, his scholarly passion not diminished by age.

“How do you know it was real?” She started by asking, trying to establish his credentials.

“Right to the heart of things,” Jakov winced slightly. “We will ignore Plato as the origin of the name and sailor accounts over the centuries since they are notoriously unreliable, as well as other underwater civilizations in myth such as Mu, Lemuria, Ys, or Thule. That leaves me with only archeological remains, first-hand accounts over part of the twentieth century that I had the pleasure to interview, and a few records of coastal cities trading with an unnamed but advanced civilization.”

“First-hand accounts?” Robin asked, pulling a notepad from her bag and writing in it as they talked.

“Multiple,” the former professor nodded with a smile. “That is how I became interested in the subject. I had the pleasure of working as an intern for Dr. Stephen Shin while working on my thesis. He was the expert on the subject at the time. He met an Atlantian in person. His testimony matched those of others who fought in the Great War. Unfortunately, he died of a heart attack not long after I received my doctorate.”

“What happened?” Robin asked, leaning forward in interest. “That sounds like a valid study, at least to build on with further evidence.”

“Unfortunately, the post-war period was the last time we could find reliable testimony consistently,” Jakov shook his head in sadness. “We still received the occasional notice of sightings along coasts or were able to track down records of trades with unknown foreign powers that were consistent with previous behaviour. But that also disappeared during the Cold War. What few colleagues I had eventually gave up once we were able to use submersible technology to scan the sea floor and found nothing. I turned in my resignation after that. Here I am now.”

“You said there were archeological remains?”

“The usual things,” Jakov nodded. “Pottery not matching any known style. Tools made of sea-based material such as coral and the like. Many bore a similar emblem, a symbol similar to the letter A. That is how we knew them to be from a common source. We then matched them to the same styled items that did not bear the symbol.”

“And where are these remains now?” Robin asked, taking more notes.

“The Pergamonmuseum holds most of the artifacts we discovered,” he said with a sad shake of his head. “They display them not as a symbol of Atlantis but as a derivative form of the Ancient Greek Delta. Despite their age not consistent with its use as a writing system.”

“Have any more records or artifacts appeared since your retirement?”

“None,” Jakov answered with a shake of his head. “The last valid discovery, a half-destroyed weapon similar to a trident, was discovered in Fisterra, Spain, a decade before my retirement. One of my former students would send me updates for a while as she continued looking for more evidence but had no luck. Reports were unverifiable, and sightings turned out to be mutants. Back then, most of the mutant population was still hiding what they were. Eventually, she gave up like the others.”

“But not you?” Robin asked.

“No,” the old professor answered with certainty. “I have seen too much proof, talked to too many people, and noticed too much consistency that I am sure Atlantis exists. Or

did so in the mid-twentieth century at least. What happened after that is a mystery I would love to solve."

"So would I," Robin agreed with a kind smile.

If this man was correct, then the advent of the Endbringers six years ago was not the catalyst for the subaquatic civilization's disappearance, unlike Mikael's theory.

Of course, Robin needed to verify the truth with her own eyes.

"Do you have any records on hand?" She asked. "Of your studies, findings, or which artifacts are which so I may track them down?"

"Certainly," Jakov Vukelic stood with some slight difficulty and made his way over to a bookshelf filled with notebooks and binders.

Nico Robin allowed herself a triumphant smile.

This was the kind of thing she lived for.

History and mystery.

******

"What do you have?" Amanda Waller asked the lead scientist working on Project Leukocyte as they walked through the halls of Cadmus.

This was her first meeting with this particular man, a tall, broad-shouldered man who looked like he hadn't seen the sun in years. He had to be good if the heads put him in charge of such an important project.

"Everything and nothing!" He declared with quiet pride.

She wasn't amused.

"We simply do not have enough material," the scientist explained upon seeing her dower look. "We had to use a few drops for testing, and the remaining samples are nowhere near enough for more extensive experiments."

"Cloning." She asked/ordered.

"Impossible," he rejected with a shake of his head. "Any and every attempt to replicate the material fails. No matter what we do, it does not grow, multiply, or divide. We cannot make more. Whether this is due to mystical limits or an inherent property of the material, we do not know."

"So you have nothing."

"And everything," the man corrected. God save her from eggheads, and this one seemed even prouder than most. "The limited material has hampered us, but we have discovered quite a bit. First and least consequential is that the material doesn't degrade. At all. We've had it for a week, and it has not dried, degenerated, evaporated, or even

decomposed. Once we extracted the dirt from it and isolated it, it remained entirely unchanged except when we pulled a few drops for our experiments. It can exist indefinitely so long as it is not mixed with something."

"And?" The head of the PRT was intrigued by the implications of something that didn't degrade, but she did not allow it to show. Refrain from giving science types an inch of interest, or they will ramble about nonsense for hours.

"Secondly, we have evaluated the DNA the blood contained. It's not human." Amanda grunted, showing she wasn't impressed. Anyone could have guessed that. "It is genetically compatible with humans, which isn't rare in the broader universe, but unremarkable, unlike our work with other extraterrestrial DNA. What is more interesting is the external genetic information it contains."

"Stop beating around the bush," Amanda ordered.

"It contains DNA similar to reptiles, though infinitely more complex." The man continued to lead her down the underground halls. "But it is separate from the main threads, an external influence. It changes the original. To what extent, I do not know. We do not have a base to act as a control. We only know the sample has been changed because of an experiment where we introduced other DNA samples to a drop, and this 'reptile strand' spread and infected the new blood."

Amanda didn't say anything, mind racing at the implications. The image of a stern blonde, Glynda Goodwitch, transforming into a dragon yesterday.

"Third, and most importantly, is what happens when the blood is mixed with still living material," the pale scientist continued. The pair had reached a lab attended by other scientists watching and documenting something occurring in a small cage. They parted as the pair approached.

In the small container, a tiny white mouse paced around the edges, head swinging back and forth as its beady orange and slit eyes took in the room, the people, and its cage.

Tiny, almost invisible scales dotted its tail.

"We gave it one drop. Only one." The head scientist said, almost reverentially, as tiny slit orange eyes watched them warily. "It became smarter. Stronger. Faster. Better in every way imaginable. The blood does not spread. Unlike a virus, it doesn't self-replicate. The change is directly proportional to the amount of blood introduced to total body mass. It would take roughly half a litre to see comparative transformations in a human."

"We do not have enough blood for that," Amanda said, disgruntled.

"We don't." The scientist agreed as his eyes met hers steadily. Left unsaid was that they needed more. "The blood doesn't reject anything—an actual, universal donor. It works for any species, sex, or organism. As we have seen, the transformation can be

reversed without health detriments, leaving only the benefits. It can be ingested or injected. Everything it touches is *more* than it was before. And the growth is exponential."

Visions of draconic soldiers swam in Waller's mind. Heroes they could trust, given a dose of blood to see their powers grow exponentially.

Immortality.

"Enough blood could turn anyone, absolutely anyone, into a god." There was a look in the scientist's eyes; the genuine desire, the flame of ambition. His passion was admirable, even if it did make him look a little sinister. He met her eyes, emphasizing every word he said next. "This is the next step in human evolution."

There was a beat of silence.

"How much do you need?" Amanda asked, turning her eyes back to the dragon-mouse.

"As much as possible." He answered, calming down now that he had the promise of support. "Samples from the Dragon would be best. A beast of that size has more than enough blood to lose."

"We know how to get to the island," Amanda nodded, a plan forming in her mind. "Getting back with any samples is the problem."

"If you manage it, bring samples from other wildlife there. It might be the island itself that is the key. Other fauna might possess similar blood. We need anything and everything."

"You'll have your samples," Amanda said firmly. "Keep up the good work, and learn everything you can about it. Especially if we can replicate it."

"Of course."

"I do not want even a hint of this leaking out," the PRT head emphasized. The tall man nodded. "If the Elden Lord finds out, we can kiss goodbye to our lives, country, or even the earth. He's fooled others with that goody-too-shoes act, but I don't buy it."

"Naturally."

"I'll be back in a week to inspect your progress," Amanda turned to leave. She still had to meet with Captain America about rebuilding the Cleveland branch of the Protectorate. She paused, realizing an oversight. "I never caught your name."

"My apologies," the man said with a somewhat archaic bow. "I assumed someone had briefed you. I took over after Director Westfield's unfortunate accident. Nathaniel Essex, at your service."

Author's Note:

Fun fact, the Catalogue has no defence against DNA evaluation I could find. But information defence does its work to hide secrets by misdirection and misleading.
What an interesting coincidence that the dragon communion has draconification side effects.
Won't say much this time, just touching in with a few players in the world and showing how the members of The Family do have lives that don't revolve around Mikael. As with all side stories, it is not necessary to read them, but they flesh out the world and characters a bit more, so I recommend them. Later story beats also make more sense if you read them.
I initially planned to have another sex-based SS, but I am too excited for the rest of the part, so next week, we will be back for Furlough 5, and I'll write the SS after Furlough's done.
I'll see you all next Friday.

FURLOUGH V

Hey Bob, Supe had a straight job
Even though he coulda smashed through
Any bank in the United States
He had the strength but he would not
Folks said his Family were all dead
Planet crumbled, but Superman he forced himself
To carry on, forget Krypton, and keep goin'

"Two triple-deckers, half a pound of bacon, and fully loaded with extra cheese," I called out as Chris, still in his costume as Winman, eagerly proffered his plate on which I placed his burgers.

"Thank you," the red and gold-themed hero said as he sat nearby on the lip of the building and dug into his meal with gusto.

Someone else might have been put off by someone eating that much food and staying in healthy shape.

I lived with Artoria.

"And for you," I turned to the shorter green hero. "Two towers of deceit, half a pound of lies, and fully loaded with everything wrong with the world."

"Dude," Beast Boy whined good-naturedly as I passed him his own meal of fake barbeque. "Not cool."

"Sorry," I said with a chuckle. "I couldn't resist."

I had seen no sign that Cyborg, a hero usually associated with the Teen Titans or Justice League, existed in this world when I first investigated. I was bummed at the idea since he was one of the more interesting characters. I couldn't help but echo his words to Beast Boy, if only as a tribute as a fellow meat lover.

I liked to think there was a version of him somewhere that shed a tear of pride at my dig.

"It's healthier!" The green-skinned man defended himself.

"It is," I agreed. "Doesn't mean I'll give up on bacon any time soon. Trust me. When you go for centuries unable to taste anything, your first lamb chop is like nothing else."

There was a beat of silence as the group digested (ha) my words.

Of course, I took the opportunity to fuck with them some more.

"After barrel rolling into and then electrocuting me, that damn goat tasted delicious."

"You have electric goats?" Mercury asked, looking doubtfully.

"I have electric, rolling goats," I corrected smugly. "Much cooler. I might bring one sometime."

“They are an odd breed,” Scathach corroborated. “But you are correct. They are quite tasty.”

“Especially after they annoy you,” I nodded sagely. “Vengeance is my favourite meal of the day.”

“Dude,” Winman piped up in between bites. “What even is your life?”

“A greek comedy,” I answered easily, getting small smiles of amusement from Glynda and Scathach.

“Anyway, I turn into animals,” Garfield explained after shaking his head, even as he took a bite of his fake meat. “It’s, like, I am them. How would you feel if you ate people?”

“Nothing,” I shrugged, uncaring. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Not counting eating dragon hearts for communion, I also felt everything the draconic heads I summoned did. When one of them ate an enemy, I tasted everything.

There was an awkward silence as everyone on the roof heard me and paused.

“Oh duh,” Beast Boy eventually said, smacking his head in realization. “You’re a dragon!”

“I had honestly almost forgotten,” Nightwing said, also still in costume, as he took his own order from me. “You act so humanly, it’s hard to think of you as being larger than the state of California.”

“That and you are seriously cool,” Winman piped in, already working on his second burger. “Seriously, you are way chiller than I would have thought for someone who ate the Simurgh whole.”

“How was she tasting of?” Starfire asked eagerly, floating near my face even as I poured extra mustard on her meal.

“Like chicken,” I deadpanned.

“Really?”

“No, but if you believe that, then I have this lovely igloo for sale,” I snarked. I thought I heard a snort that could have come from Raven, sitting in a corner by herself, but when I turned to look, she was staring over the bay. Turning back to Starfire, who looked crestfallen at my words, I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t really taste anything. She was too small. The closest comparison would be if you tried to eat a piece of plastic the size of a mote of dust.” That answer satisfied her more as she floated over to her seat beside Nightwing.

“So you can breathe fire and stuff?” Beast Boy asked eagerly with his mouth full. “That’s so cool.”

“I can’t,” I shook my head with a slight pout even as I served Scathach her own meal. “I’m not that type of dragon.”

“Right,” Winman nodded in realization. “You’re white. You have ice breath.”

“Nope,” I denied again. “I actually don’t have a breathe weapon of my own.”

“Really?” Winman looked disappointed. “So, no poison? Acid? Lightning? Nothing? None of you have a dragon’s breath?”

“We do,” Scathach nodded, a hint of smugness in her tone. “All of us do. Just not him.”

“Laugh it up,” I said petulantly.

“What about when you destroyed that corpse? That was fire and lighting.” Nightwing asked.

“It was a spell,” I said with a shake. For emphasis, I summoned Smarag’s, Ekzykes’, and Borealis’ heads above me.

The titans flinched but didn’t react more than that.

“How marvellous,” Starfire said, her eyes shining in excitement.

“I can use a whole bunch of dragon breaths using magic,” I explained and dispelled the conjurations, knowing full well the Justice League and PRT would know about this by the end of the day. “But they aren’t mine. Just recreations of others.” There was a reason I used Placidusax’s Ruin to destroy Doomsday’s corpse rather than a breathe weapon of my own.

A ‘weakness’ that really wasn’t a weakness.

A show of trust.

A dragon’s breath weapon wasn’t just another weapon. It was a way to extend their Element outside of their range. It was an incredibly powerful attack and symbolic of the dragons themselves.

Without a breath attack, a dragon was just a giant lizard with wings.

I was a bit bummed not to have an elemental breath of my own, but I didn’t let it bother me. It wasn’t like I was hurting for ways of killing people.

I was just confused about why I was the only one with the problem. Tsunade was also a Life dragon and could use her Element as a dragon’s breath attack. Diana had inherited my Freedom element and her breath, while not really damaging, had some cool effects.

Maybe because I was the only one with dual elements?

“Don’t worry, dear,” Glynda patted my chest affectionately as she took her plate. “We do not love you any less. I hear it is quite common. One in four dragons suffer from it. We will get over this. Together.”

“Really.” I deadpanned at the blonde. “ED jokes? After yesterday? For shame.” I shook my head even as her cheeks pinked at the memory. “To hit below the belt like that,” Beast Boy laughed, but most of the others groaned at the pun. Starfire just looked confused. “Someone has been a terrible influence on you.”

“You.” She said as she took her seat.

“I know,” I answered, grinning. “I am so proud.”

I loved when I was a negative influence on people.

“How do you do it?”

“You’re going to need to be more specific there. Use a breathe weapon? Corrupt my wives? Satisfy them?” I replied, waggling my eyebrows with a smirk at X-23 as she took her steak.

“How do you act so human?” The mutant clarified with a frown.

I pretended not to notice a bunch of ears perk up.

Just as I pretended that this entire meal wasn’t being recorded.

We were on top of Titan Tower in San Fransico’s bay, and, in a rare break from training over the last few days, I was cooking for the Titans as well as Glynda and Scathach. It was just the ten of us, even if I’m sure some PRT personnel would have loved to come out to enjoy the refreshing autumn air.

Once it was clear I wasn’t planning some sort of violent attack, the PRT personnel that supported the Titans returned to headquarters. They had been avoiding my wives and me, but I was sure my every action in this tower was being recorded by six cameras at any given time.

In the last three days, I had only been in the tower for a few hours in total. Mostly when the training was on pause for one reason or another. I had nothing to contribute that Glynda or Scathach couldn’t do better. So what time I did spend here was mostly spent getting to know the heroes when they weren’t getting their asses kicked.

I used the opportunity to continue building my reputation just as they used the opportunity to try and dig more info out of me.

And this was another chance for both parties.

“I’ve had practice,” I shrugged casually. “This isn’t the first time I’ve had a human body. Though I do admit, it has been a long time. With my wives, you can imagine I’ve put it through its paces.” I finished with a sly smile.

Laura didn’t even blink at the innuendo, but Glynda, sitting fifteen feet away and talking to Starfire, blushed a faint pink and glared at me. Scathach simply smirked.

There had been a few hours where all three of us had seemingly disappeared into thin air while in the tower. The PRT freaked out until we returned, thinking we were sabotaging them somehow.

I squarely laid the blame at Glynda’s feet.

Watching her ‘corruption’ by the celt during the Dream was one thing.

It was wholly another to participate in the sort of degeneracy the usually proper

huntress conjured up since her sexual awakening.

“From my point of view, to be human is to be flawed. No one is perfect. Being human is the constant state of being aware of that and either improving yourself or living with the consequences of your imperfection. That is my definition.” I continued when it looked like the heroine wouldn’t accept my joke as an answer. “ But that is just mine. If you really want my advice, stop trying to be human.”

“What?” Mercury asked, disgruntled by my answer to her friend.

“Explain,” Laura said simply rather than be insulted.

“Stop trying,” I repeated with a shrug. “I certainly have my ideas on what it means to be human, but those are my ideas. Thousands of minds have asked, ‘What does it mean to be human?’ Do you know the answer?” Laura shook her head. “That’s because no one does. Some think they do, but they don’t. We only know what it means to be ourselves. That is my advice.”

“Be yourself?” Laura asked in disbelief. “That is it?”

“Yep,” I answered as I loaded up my own plate. “I don’t mean in the kumbaya, power of friendship bullshit. Think about it this way. Starfire isn’t a human at all. Never has been. Mercury is entirely inorganic. Beast Boy’s DNA probably looks like a kaleidoscope through the lens of psychedelics. I am a Dragon from beyond time and space. All of us ‘act’ human. None of us are. Because humanity is irrelevant.”

“Hey!” Winman cried out in fake offence, but I waived him off to drive the point home.

“I mean that literally,” I continued. “Humanity is entirely irrelevant. One of the countless other species the universe calls home. One day it will go extinct, as all will. Why obsess over something so insignificant? Instead of being human, whose entire race might disappear in the snap of a finger, try to be Laura. Do you want to fight someone? Fight them! Want to be a hero? Be one! You can be a hero in the body of a monster. An angel in the body of a demon. But only you can be you.”

While talking to Laura, I ensured my words carried to the whole roof, especially the grey-skinned woman sitting off to the side, well away from anyone else.

“You ask me how I act human? I say I don’t. I act like me.”

My words weren’t lies, as I genuinely believed them, but they weren’t the whole truth.

Acting like myself involved acting like others to mislead and manipulate.

Like right now.

Batman hadn’t been wrong that the images I presented to the world were fake in a way. A mask carefully crafted to achieve my desired outcome of carving my Family a place on this planet.

A mask that was as real as everything underneath it.

I never pretended to be perfect.

To be human was to be flawed, after all.

“Thank you for the advice,” Laura said politely, brows furrowed in thought even as she joined Mercury beside Scathach with her meal.

“No problem.” I shrugged again. “As I said, everyone has different ideas about what it means to be human. I don’t define humanity as a race or a behaviour pattern. To me, any self-aware, flawed being is ‘human’. Though I suppose ‘mortal’ is a more accurate term than human. It doesn’t roll off the tongue as well, though.”

“So only someone immortal would not be human in your eyes?” Nightwing asked with a frown.

“No,” I shook my head as I cut up my steak, not looking at the hero. “There is no such thing as immortals. And that’s a good thing.”

“Uh,” Beast Boy chimed in. “Yeah, there is. A whole bunch of them, in fact. Off the top of my head, all the amazons, Galactus, a bunch of gods, and a few villains, and I think Kryptonians don’t age under a yellow sun. Right?” The green-skinned hero looked to his leader for confirmation, and the former Robin nodded.

“When I talk about immortality, I don’t mean agelessness,” I shook my head as I thought about how to word my explanation.

I had been subtly guiding this entire conversation, trying to make a point to one person in particular without ever talking to her.

“Do you know where the title Elden Lord comes from?” I asked.

“From Ranni’s homeworld,” Robin answered easily.

“Right,” I nodded. “But, strictly speaking, I am not an Elden Lord. That title was originally given to those who reigned with the blessing of the primordial god of that world. Most recently, it was used to denominate the consorts of Queen Marika the Eternal. Before her, it was used for other beings. Every one of them was immortal by your standards, as were her children and supporters. You following me so far?”

The heroes nodded.

“I killed them all. And their god for good measure.”

I could almost see an electric current pass through the group as my words registered, the dichotomy between my casual interactions with them until now and the acknowledgement that I was a killer with a body count in the seven digits conflicting within their minds.

I wasn’t building my reputation to make myself seem like a hero. That was Artoria and Diana’s desire.

I was building my reputation to make my Family sacrosanct.

Something sacrosanct did not just mean holy or good. It also carried the connotations of divine punishment should that sanctity be violated.

If I had my way, the heroes of this world would fight to the death defending my Family if they were ever at risk. They would do it because my wives were not only helpful and likable but because they knew what I would do if any of them came to harm.

While extending my hand in aid, I would be the boogeyman at their back.

Building my reputation now was simply killing three birds with one stone.

"They had been alive for tens of thousands of years," I continued as if I hadn't noticed their tenseness. "And I killed them all the same. And I am not the only one. Scathach, how many gods have you killed?"

"A few," the celt replied casually. "They weren't too impressive. More power than skill. They were hardly worth mentioning compared to when I slew my own death."

"And Glynda, your world had immortals, right?"

"Two of them," the teacher nodded, understanding the lesson I was trying to teach. "One I worked for was reincarnated in a new body every time he died. The other was just unkillable. They fought each other for longer than recorded history. They are both dead now."

"You see," I turned back to the young heroes. A few had gotten my point already, but some still needed clarification. "There is no such thing as immortality because all things end. It doesn't matter if it is after a hundred years, a million years, when the sun goes out, when the universe collapses, or when the multiverse vanishes into nothing. Everything eventually dies. You can try and avoid it. In fact, you should. I know I will. But all things die. Even I, who will measure my life not in years but in universal terms, will eventually perish."

Death had proven that point when she had told me every Tier had limits. Even she, multiversal to a degree I couldn't even fathom, was still limited to certain worlds and abilities.

Eventually, once everything under her domain vanished into the annals of time and the last breath of life left the last multiverse, she too would disappear.

"You say that is a good thing?" Mercury asked.

"It is," I nodded. "If something was truly immortal, there would be no room for anything else. They would be the be-all and end-all. They could attain anything they wanted because nothing could stop them. Without the limits of mortality, they would consume everything eventually till nothing remained. Just by existing, something without end would guarantee the end of reality."

Even the Company was limited. If it wasn't, there would be no need to hire people, expand a business, collect waifus, or be petty enough to screw me over.

One didn't need Company Policy when they were the be-all and end-all.

They would just kill Death and me, and probably our omniverse for good measure.

In other words, you are limited when you want something but don't have it.

Everything with limits will eventually end.

I had thirty-five million years to think about what it meant to be a Dragon of Freedom and what it meant to be truly limitless.

And I came to realize the truth.

I was only without limits, theoretically.

I could grow infinitely.

That didn't mean I would.

A True Immortal would either want nothing; thus, their existence is irrelevant, or they want and have everything. Then they would consume it all.

And I wasn't there yet.

"Ugh," Beast Boy groaned, holding his head. "I don't get it."

"You don't need to," I shook my head in amusement even as I made sure to enunciate my following words carefully so everyone could hear me very clearly. "You just need to know this: Every god, demon, or immortal can be killed. No exceptions."

******

"He is very… what is the word?" Starfire asked her boyfriend.

"Unique? Scary? Grim? Intense?" Nightwing suggested.

"Intense!" The Tameranian exclaimed, clapping her hands in excitement.

"Mikael can be," Glynda agreed, even as she ate her meal. Her movements, like most things about her, were elegant in their precision.

"He likes to teach," Nightwing said diplomatically. Preach is a better word, in his opinion.

Glynda's look in his direction told him she understood what went unsaid.

"You must understand something about Mikael," the huntress said, wiping her mouth with her napkin before continuing. "He is old. He is powerful. He has experienced more in his life than most do in millennia of living. You would do well to remember that. When he gives advice, you would also do well to listen. It might save your life."

Nightwing frowned but said nothing.

"He is like my father," Starfire said somewhat somberly.

“How so?” Glynda asked curiously.

“He laughs loud and cries quietly,” the tameranian was looking skywards, the stars not visible in the evening sky just yet. Nightwing grabbed her hand tenderly in his own, intertwining their fingers. She looked at him with that wide smile that always did things to his stomach. Then she turned to their temporary teacher again. “My people were peaceful. My father’s reign has not been. Mikael bears that weight. His words are wise, but he talks from pain.”

“That is not… untrue,” Glynda nodded slowly, a rare look of vulnerability on her face. It was gone in an instant. “You must understand we all have our own circumstances. Nobody is without pain. My husband works hard to ensure we are all as happy as possible.”

“That is admirable,” Nightwing nodded, and, this time, there was no hidden undercurrent in his words.

If there was one thing he had learned for sure over these last few days, it was that Mikael and his wives were very much in love.

Their subtle glances at each other.

How they would gravitate together, trading small smiles.

The way their eyes would soften at even the mention of each other.

If it weren’t for the irregularity of their polyamorous relationship, it would almost be textbook fairy tale love.

Nightwing was almost jealous.

Beast Boy and Winman had definitely been jealous.

“You said you worked for one of the immortals of your world?” Nightwing asked to change the subject and dig for more information.

“He was the headmaster of Beacon academy,” Glynda nodded. “The institution I taught at.”

“You mentioned it when you first arrived,” Nightwing nodded. “You were the deputy headmistress, correct?”

“I was,” Glynda nodded stoically, not giving more information. She’d be a tough nut to crack in an interrogation.

Thankfully, he had a Starfire.

“Were you close?” She asked their temporary teacher, eyes wide in empathetic sympathy.

Raven might have been the actual empath of the team, but Star was the most genuine, outgoing, and empathetic person Dick had ever known.

“We were colleagues. Friends, even,” Glynda nodded. “We all were. My compatriots

would get on my nerves with their antics, but they were reliable when it counted. Teaching with them at Beacon will always be an honour I hold dear."

"What happened?" the Tameranian asked softly.

"The other immortal, Salem," Glynda sighed. "She led the enemies of humanity, the Grimm, and destroyed my world."

"That is terrible," Star raised a hand to her mouth in shock. "Why would she do that?"

"Sometimes villains do not need a reason, Star," Nightwing sighed sadly, thinking of his own time in Gotham. "Sometimes they just want to see the world burn."

"She had a reason," Glynda shook her head in denial. "A good one. She was immortal. She didn't age and could not be killed. And she tried. After millennia, she decided the only way to die was if the gods who cursed her were to return. The only way to do so was cause the destruction of the world."

"You sound as if you agree with her?" Nightwing asked.

"I understand her," Glynda emphasized. Nightwing noticed her eyes flick to Mikael and Scathach quickly before meeting his. "I have recently gained a new perspective on how terrible it is to be unable to die. So I understand Salem. I still condemn her. I have seen proof that her actions were not the only option. Others in her situation rose above their pain and loneliness. Even if she was not a good person, sealing herself away and resting until the world reached its natural conclusion would have been a valid and easier option. She did not."

"Did Mikael kill her?" Nightwing asked.

"No," Glynda sighed. "She got her wish. The gods returned and ended her life and all life with her."

"Then how…"

"Did I survive?" Glynda finished for Starfire with a grim smile. "I didn't."

All eyes turned to Mikael, chatting animatedly with Beast Boy and Winman.

"As I said," Glynda's were on her husband, and that same softness Nightwing had noticed before was there again. "We all carry our own pain. I am sure you have your own stories. Only the young or stupid believe their own pain is the only one that exists."

"…Sorry," Nightwing apologized, realizing how insensitive he had been with the blonde. Not just when they first met but today as well, prying into what must be a painful subject for a woman who had been nothing but helpful. Just because they weren't heroes didn't mean they hadn't faced their own tragedies.

"Apology accepted," Glynda returned her gaze to him with a warm, almost matronly smile. "That is what teachers are for. To help you learn from your mistakes."

Dick Grayson had another realization then.

No matter what else Mikeal's goal was, Glynda Goodwitch sincerely wanted to teach them. To make them better and wiser heroes.

To keep them safe.

******

"I have to know," Cessily asked her Celtic teacher. "How did the Elden Lord convince you to go along with this harem thing?" Scathach raised her eyebrow and quirked her lips. "I don't mean anything by it!" Mercury hurried to clarify, aware of what kind of hell would be waiting for her if she put the older woman in a bad mood. "It's just a bit strange, is all. You don't seem they type, is all."

"The type?" The warrior asked. Her brow was still raised, but her face was placid otherwise.

That didn't mean the mutant was safe yet.

"Badass." X-23 chimed in as she finished her meal. Laura then looked to Cessily, asking if she had used the expression correctly.

"A badass," the inorganic young woman nodded. "So's Miss Goodwitch. If your Wonder Woman is anything like ours, I cannot imagine her going along with it. You all can do better than being one of many. Isn't it demeaning? So I just wanted to know how he convinced you, is all."

"You believe he is controlling us," Scathach said, seeing the root of the problem at a glance.

"No!" Mercury practically shouted, causing a few eyes to look their way. "It's nothing." She called out, and most returned to their meals or talks.

She didn't notice Mikael do so with a smile.

"He's not right?" She asked under her breath, eyes still scanning the rooftop for anyone eavesdropping.

"If he was, would asking about it when he is here be a good idea?" The raised eyebrow was lowered now, but the celt looked almost amused at the question.

"You usually leave as soon as training is done. This is the first time I've had the chance."

"Your concern is understandable but misguided." Scathach dismissed.

"It's just weird," the mutant pressed, certain something unnatural was going on. "One guy. Ten girls. At first, I thought it was a personal thing. Submissive women, dominant guys. It sometimes happens in some cultures. Which, hey, great for them if it works for them. But none of you seem like you would take shit from anyone. Even if they were super

strong. You can't tell me that it isn't suspicious that all of you are following his every order and fawning over him."

"Shady." Laura nodded in agreement, looking severe. Mercury didn't let the wince show, once more remembering X-23's less-than-stellar time living on the streets.

"Enough."

Scathach's word wasn't loud.

Mercury shut her mouth.

"I am Scathach!"

The declaration was final.

"I am submissive to no one." She said it with certainty, a resolute pride no one could break. "I have killed students for similar claims in the past."

Mercury's liquid body rippled.

X-23's claws peaked from beneath her skin.

Those red eyes, like bloody gems, bore down on the pair with tangible weight.

Neither doubted she would kill them if she wished.

"I follow Mikael not because he is my superior. Not because he is a man I love. Not because he is stronger than me. Not because I am being controlled." The Queen of the Land of Shadows enunciated every sentence slowly as if daring the pair to speak up in contradiction.

They didn't.

"I follow Mikael because he saved me. Because he shows me places and peoples I have never dreamed of. Because his council is wise and his love is true. Because this road we travel together will one day end when our blades meet. I follow him because I desire that battle more than anything else in existence. I follow him because one day, Mikael will kill me."

Laura and Cessily sat in shocked silence, unable to understand the thought process of this beautiful yet utterly alien woman.

"Your words stem from concern, so I will not slay you where you sit," Scathach stood from her seat, her body as prideful and regal as any queen or goddess. "You have five minutes to meet me by the shore. If you have time to be concerned about your teacher, you have time to train."

And then she was gone, leaving the stunned pair to look at where she had disappeared.

"Pst," Mikael stage whispered, his face appearing between the two young women, causing them to jump in surprise. "I think you pissed her off."

"Jesus!" Mercury exclaimed, turning her arm back from a flail into a hand.

Laura had been quicker.

“Are you alright?!” She asked with urgent concern as she withdrew her claws from an inch deep in his neck.

“It fine,” the Elden Lord waived off with a smile, raising a hand to his torn throat. When he removed it, not even a drop of blood remained. “See? Fine. You really don’t want that touching you.” Then he waved his hand, and the blood disappeared from her claws in a small burst of smoke.

“You surprised us,” Laura said.

“That was the point of sneaking up on you,” Mikael laughed.

“Why was she angry?” Mercury asked, guessing he had been listening. “I mean, no offence, but you can’t deny it’s a bit weird for one guy to keep ten women happy.”

“It works for us,” he shrugged. “It wasn’t the questioning of our relationship that was the problem. You wounded her pride.”

“By insinuating you could be controlling her?”

“By saying she is submissive. That she can be controlled at all,” Mikeal elaborated. When they didn’t look convinced, he continued. “You must understand that all my wives come from different cultures and have different values. The whole kerfuffle with the League was because Ranni values strength in a leader.”

“Did you just use the word kerfuffle?”

“Anyway,” Mikael continued, ignoring Mercury’s incredulity. “Though she doesn’t show it most of the time, Scathach is one of the proudest of my wives. From birth, she was the best, and she knew it. Her students might be more famous, but no one during her time was her equal. Since then, she has only gotten better. She might follow my lead every once in a while or even act a certain way in the bedroom, but I never mistake her for submissive. Especially because you think she is weaker than me. Of my Family, she is the most willing and able to kill me.”

“But that doesn’t explain why she’s in your harem!” Mercury wasn’t inherently opposed to non-monogamous relationships, but the Elden Lord’s entire dynamic was in opposition to her worldview.

“I keep telling everyone,” Mikael sighed, still smiling as he shook his head in wry amusement. “It’s not a harem. It’s a Family. Maybe I should bring a whiteboard with me. With diagrams, graphs, red strings, and photos? Then I’ll be able to conclusively prove I’m the Queen of England.”

This?

This was the man who married the proud Scathach? Who managed to convince ten women to share?

This buffoon?

It had to be mind control.

Or he was really, *really* good in the sack.

“By the way,” Mikael said with a sadistic smile. “Hasn’t it been a few minutes already? You aren’t going to keep her waiting, are you?”

Laura said it for both of them.

“Fuck.”

“Have fun,” Mikael waved them off with a smile that wouldn’t melt butter. “I’m going to go poke our little misanthrope.”

******

“Poke. Poke. Poke. Poke poke. Pokepokepokepoke.”

“STOP!” Raven shouted in frustration, fed up with this most recent annoyance.

Bad enough she had to deal with Garfield and Chris, now the Elden Lord, the guy everyone was freaking out about a few days ago, turns out to be a huge man-child?

If there was a god, he hated her.

“I will once you eat your food,” Mikeal said smugly, holding out a plate for her.

It smelled delicious.

“I’m not hungry,” she denied.

Her stomach rumbled.

He raised an eyebrow, somehow looking even smugger.

Azarath. Metrion. Zinthos.

Azarath. Metrion. Zinthos.

Calm down, Raven.

Don’t punch the man who can destroy the city with a sneeze.

He’s trying to get a reaction out of you. Do not let him win. You are peace. You are calm.

“Poke.”

“Gah!” Raven screamed in frustration, the nearby furniture tearing itself apart from her outburst of emotion.

Glynda waved her hand, and it was back together.

Mikael wasn’t even poking her!

He was just saying the word ‘poke!’

“I’m leaving.” She declared. She tried to stand up.

Tried again.

And again.

“Did you glue me to my chair?” She asked incredulously.

“Glue is such a harsh way of putting it,” Mikael waived her off. “I prefer the term ‘cursed for my amusement’.”

“You cursed me!” Raven asked, aghast.

“For my amusement,” Mikael added again, not looking guilty in the slightest. “I’ve been trying to widen my repertoire recently, and I am married to one of the most famous witches to ever live. I’m still new to curses, so this one is straightforward to get out of.”

“How do I do that?” Raven demanded.

“You can try and overpower it,” Mikael said, and Raven tried to channel enough power to escape. No success. “Good luck with that. Or I can release you if you do something for me.”

“What do you want?” Raven asked warily.

Mikael held the plate of barbeque in front of her face.

“I want you to enjoy the meal I spent so much effort to make for you out of the kindness of my heart.”

“Fine,” Raven sighed aggressively. “Give it here.”

Mikael did.

Raven hated that it was the best meal she had ever tasted.

“There you go,” the Elden Lord smiled at her, taking a seat nearby. “That wasn’t so hard now, was it?”

Raven glared at him, her mouth full of the most tender and juicy steak in the world.

“By the way, that curse will wear off in another five seconds,” Mikael said with a shrug, still smiling smugly. “What can I say? I’m new to curses.”

Raven glared harder.

Raven kept glaring as she ate the rest of the food.

She wanted to slow down and savour it but was unwilling to give the annoying man the satisfaction.

“You’re welcome,” he said, taking her plate from her.

“Thank. You.” She bit out as she stood up to leave.

She took two steps and froze.

“I recognize that rune, by the way.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Raven said, pulling her hood further and deepening the shadows covering her forehead.

“Scath. Or scaith, however you want to pronounce it. It means shadow in Irish. Did you know that?” He said casually as she quickened her pace. “It’s actually part of

Scathach's name and the name of her home. Dun Scaith. I'm sure she noticed it as well. Has she said anything? I don't think she has. Afterall-"

She was fleeing.

Running from his words.

From him.

From the truth.

From tomorrow.

Raven disappeared through the door, not bothering to open it, just phasing through it like it wasn't even there.

She was down the stairs so quickly she didn't even feel them.

Items shattered as she passed, her emotions leaking destructive magic into the air.

The hall. A left. Another hall.

There.

Her room.

Raven burst into her room, her sanctuary, with her chest heaving from adrenalin and fear.

Mikael sat in the chair near her bed, smiling softly at her.

"Why would she?" He continued, not showing any indication of having stopped his sentence or taken notice of her flight. "She knows nothing of Trigon the Terrible."

Her sanctuary shook.

Books flew open, pages tearing from their binding. Her dresser fell over with a loud BANG. Her bed split in half. Mattress, frame, sheets and covers tore down the middle sending shards of wood and bolts of fabric spinning across the room. Her window exploded, glass tearing through the thick curtains and showering in a deadly crystalline rain.

Mikael sat in her chair, unbothered by the chaos around him.

His eyes never left hers, and his smile never dimmed.

"What…" Raven rasped from a dry throat. "Do you want?"

"I would really like for the world not to end tomorrow. I just got here." He said with a chuckle. "That would be a shitty birthday gift. Take a seat," he nodded to a chair that appeared out of thin air in front of him. "And we can talk about stopping the apocalypse."

******

The next day, October 30th, at 3:33pm, a fiery explosion would rock Diamond Heights Shopping Center.

The Teen Titans, battered and bruised from the day's training, would do the heroic thing and drag their weakened forms to aid first responders in rescuing the victims and investigating the original cause of the explosion.

They were walking into a trap.

Only one of them was aware of it.

She did not tell the others.

Author's Note:

It's good to be back to the main story.

I'm sorry (not sorry) for the shorter chapter and the cliffhanger ending, but I simply had to cut it off there, or it would mess up the pacing of the rest of the part. Two more chapters in Furlough to go, and they will be on the larger side, so you can look forward to that.

So have a bit of characterization with plot for now.

I'll see you all next week.

Ps: Some people have been curious about what I put at the start of the chapters. For volume 1, they were all poems. Volume 2 are song lyrics. I choose them to set the tone, a hint at the content of the chapter, and a nod to the themes I like to weave through the story.

Volume 1:

Confinement- I Felt An Angel, by Anonymous
Isolation- I Sit And Think, by J. R. R. Tolkein
Solitude- In The Forest, by Sarojini Naidu
Desolation 1- A Call to Adventure, by John Mark Green
Desolation 2- The Land of Beyond, by Robert W Service
Desolation 3 and 4- Die Slowly, by Pablo Neruda
Desolation 5- When We Two Parted, by George Gordon Byron
Desolation 6- Failure, by Amos Russel Wells
Break Out!- Cloths of Heaven, by W. B. Yeats
Epilogue- But Where Began the Change, by George Meredith

FURLOUGH VI

And they say
That a hero could save us
I'm not gonna stand here and wait
I'll hold onto the wings of the eagles
Watch as we all fly away
Someone told me
Love would all save us
But, how can that be
Look what love gave us
A world full of killing
And blood spilling
That world never came

"It's been six minutes since the initial explosion," Nightwing explained, his voice coming through the communicators as the wind rushed by the group. He, Mercury, and X-23 were being carried by Raven while the rest flew under their own power. "Emergency responders are on their way, but we will be there first. Civilian evacuation is a priority."

"What caused the explosion?" Winman asked as he navigated the sky on his hoverboard. Six of his drones followed in a loose formation.

"The exact cause is unknown, but there are sightings of a large, extremely muscular dark-skinned man running around and destroying the buildings. Apprehending him is also a goal but evacuation takes precedence. If anyone runs into him, radio the others and move to intercept if possible."

""Understood.""

Nightwing noticed Raven didn't respond with the others but filled it away for later discussion. This was hardly the first time she hadn't spoken up when prompted.

The smoke from the burning shopping center, one of the largest in San Fransico, was visible long before the buildings were. A towering plume of black fumes filled the afternoon sky, and the Titans could hear sirens and screams as they approached the disaster.

The area was devastated.

The parking lot was the center of the blast, with a large hole gouged out of the middle. Concrete, metal and piping lay exposed in the deep hole that was now filling up with sewage from the ruptured lines. Cars had been blasted to the side in a ring, toppled over on their sides and upside down.

The buildings were not better off.

They were all on fire, and most of the roofs had collapsed to one degree or another.

Large glass windows had shattered, sending shards like millions of tiny knives at the hapless shoppers.

The dead and the dying lay everywhere.

Screams, cries for help, wailing, and begging resounded through the air.

"Titans! Go!" Nightwing cried, landing with a roll and sprinting for one of the nearest buildings. Pressing a button on his neck, a gas mask rose to cover his mouth and nose.

Already briefed on the way over, the young heroes dove into action with the confidence of long experience.

Except one.

Raven flew over the parking lot, righting cars and freeing those trapped inside.

As she levitated the injured and the dying towards a safe spot for the paramedics to treat when they arrived, she felt no confidence.

Even the sombre resolution that her teammates held was wholly absent in her.

As she gently lowered a woman screaming in pain due to the shrapnel in her legs to the sidewalk, all Raven felt was guilt and fear.

******

The fight left Raven at the Elden Lord's words.

He knew.

He knew everything.

Woodenly she floated to sit on the ruined frame of her bed, uncaring for the woodchips, destroyed sheets, or shards of glass that covered the floor.

What was the point of running anymore?

With Raven's emotional surrender, the chaos caused by her powers subsided.

For a long moment, everything was silent in the Titan's room. Her dark curtains had been shredded by the exploding window panes, letting in the barest hint of light from the fading sun and the much brighter blues of Ranni's Dark Moon.

Mikeal's smile, so teasing and smug a second ago, softened slightly as he watched her collapse.

"Hey," he said softly, a teasing note in his voice. "Relax. It's just an apocalypse. Not the end of the world or anything. Think of it as another Tuesday." He paused, realizing how absurd his words sounded. "Scratch that. It's Tuesday. You don't have the energy from the weekend left over, like on Monday, and you still have the rest of the week to go. Tuesdays are the worst. I'd rather have an apocalypse."

There was another long moment of silence, this one slightly more awkward, as Raven stared at the man in disbelief.

"Jeez, tough crowd," he sighed.

"What do you want?" Raven asked again, her voice firmer than before.

"I already told you," Mikael smiled smugly again. "I want to stop the apocalypse. One of them, at least. You guys have one every other week, and I am not bored enough to spend all my time dealing with them. This one just looks more fun than others."

"You can't stop him," Raven said softly, drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. She stopped looking at the man, staring at the debris-covered floor but not seeing it. "No one can. He's too strong. You might have conquered worlds, but he rules dimensions. This is just another one on his list."

"It's like you didn't listen to me at all. Everything dies. No exceptions. The big jalapeno is just a jumped-up imp with delusions of adequacy. I can take him."

"You can't!" Raven insisted, looking at the lounging man once more. At some point, he had flipped himself in the chair, his head hanging down in the air and his feet on the back. His hair brushed the ground as he grinned up at her. "No one can. I've talked to everyone I can think of. Dr. Fate. Dr. Strange. Constantine. I even managed to ask Morgaine le Fey. None of them have ever heard of anyone ever stopping him. Once he sets his sights on a dimension, it is his. He is inevitable."

"That's my line," Mikael said petulantly. Then he frowned for the first time in this conversation. Flipping himself right side up, he suddenly met her eyes, looking serious. Draconic eyes bore into Raven's own, and she swallowed nervously at their intensity. "You talked to all these people? About Daddy Daddy Do?"

"When I first arrived in this dimension, I was looking for all the help I could get," Raven nodded, thinking back to those early months. Lost and confused, before meeting her fellow Titans, she had wandered the world alone in search of anyone who could help her.

"And they did nothing?" Mikael asked, looking dubious. "Didn't try and banish you? Kill you? Stop Clifford, the big red dog? Nothing?"

"They didn't believe me," Raven shook her head, subtly clenching her fists at the memory. "Most thought the dimensional walls would hold him back like they have before. Those who realized I was his daughter, a half-demon, they thought it was a trap. They thought he was controlling me. They'd be opening the way in trying to stop his arrival." Raven smiled wanly at the man rubbing his chin in thought. "He is not known to be a good father."

"Hmm," Mikael hummed, eyes narrowing. Then he shook his and refocused on her. "No matter their mistake, never fear. I am here!" He puffed up his chest and sent a cheesy smile her way.

As if to reassure her.

It didn't.

******

X-23 found the suspect in under a minute.

The smoke obscured her senses, so it was more a factor of luck than skill that she noticed the towering black man with four glowing red eyes crash through a wall in one of the buildings. A movement in the corner of her eye had drawn her attention, and she saw his back disappear into the smoke-filled halls.

"Target spotted," she called out to her communicator as she sliced through a door with her claws. The people trapped inside clamoured out, coughing and wheezing from the smoke, but since they were mobile and no one else was in that room, X-23 was already turning to chase. "The mail store. Pursuing."

"I'm nearby," Mercury called out. "I'll be with you once I get this last guy out. Try to drag him into the open. The buildings are already unstable."

"Everyone else, keep evacuating," Nightwing called.

"Copy," X-23 called as she hurried to follow the trail of destruction the man was leaving behind.

The mutant felt her annoyance rise.

This entire attack was pointless.

Destruction for its own sake.

There was no reason to attack a shopping center. No money in it. Nothing valuable or significant.

She could be training, getting better with every spar against one of the best teachers the world had ever seen.

Instead, she was here.

A bunch of people were dead, and more would follow.

X-23 looked forward to taking out this frustration on the attacker's hide.

She was so caught up in her feelings that the mutant was almost defeated when the monster of a man burst from the wall to her side.

Sheetrock, wood and metal blasted away as hands the size of plate lunged to grab X-23.

Only instincts, long ingrained in her through training, saved her.

That, and Laura was short.

At over eight feet tall, the giant of a man was so massive that his head carved through

the ceiling. His arms were so thick with muscle that each was as wide as her waist.

While all that suggested superhuman strength, it also limited flexibility and mobility.

X-23 tossed herself bodily out of the way, rolling on the ground and coming up in a crouch, claws extended in preparation.

Four red eyes glared at her as he snarled.

X-23 snarled back.

She lunged at him, claws extended to carve chunks from his flesh.

He smacked her aside with a massive fist.

X-23 smashed into, and through, two walls before landing and carving a groove through the dirt of the park behind the buildings.

She was on her feet in a few seconds, wounds already healing.

She snarled again.

Partly at the four-eyed man charging at her.

Mostly at herself.

It pissed her off that he had managed to get the drop on her.

It pissed her off more that she hadn't killed him yet.

"Grrrrr," she growled, the ability for speech lost in her rage.

She lunged for him, ducking under another punch and impaling one set of claws in his side.

He roared with rage and pain, grabbing her by the arm and tossing her aside closer to the buildings again.

She landed on her feet, ready to charge once more.

A tendril of liquid metal wrapping around her throat stopped her.

"You don't deserve it," a female voice growled in her ears. "If I can't have a body, no one can."

X-23 lashed out, claws separating the chunk of silvery substance holding her tight.

Whoever this was, they were pissing her off too.

"Die!" The strangely familiar voice snarled.

If the red haze of rage that consumed X-23 had been less dense, the mutant might have cried the same thing as she lunged.

Instead, Laura snarled as she tried to kill her best friend and teammate.

******

"You can't win!" Raven insisted, standing from her and glaring at the irreverent man. "I can't stop him. You can't stop him. The League can't stop him! No one can! He isn't something

like an Endbringer! You can't fight him and beat him back. When he arrives tomorrow, that is it. The End!" The debris started to float around her room as her emotions rose again.

"I am sensing a lot of negativity in you," Mikael leaned back on his chair on two feet and stapled his fingers together as he looked at her in mock seriousness. "Let us talk about that. What are the stressors in your life? How is your relationship with your father?"

The chair under the Elden Lord shattered.

Mikael didn't move, still holding his position in mid-air like some bad magical therapist.

Raven had never wanted to strangle someone more.

Perhaps sensing she was near her breaking point, he finally took mercy on her.

"In all seriousness," Mikael sighed, standing up and ignoring the items whirling around the room. "No one and nothing is invincible."

He gently rested a hand on her shoulder as his smile turned sympathetic.

She flinched at his touch before relaxing. Usually, proximity to people increased her empathic abilities to an uncomfortable degree. Skin-to-skin contact was almost painful. But Mikael and his family were different. She felt nothing from them.

He still removed his hand when he noticed how uncomfortable she was.

"What do you have to lose?" He asked softly. "Either the world is destroyed tomorrow, and nothing we do will stop it, or we can stop it if we put forth the effort. I hate people who give up due to their circumstances without even trying. Even if a struggle is fruitless, it is never without meaning. Even if only to ourselves."

Raven stared into the draconic eyes of a man she had only met a few days ago and felt a sense of vertigo.

In a brief, very minor flash of Insight, she realized a tiny fragment of the Truth.

In her mind's eye, she saw a man walking alone through ash as worlds crumbled around him. As walls rose up in front of him, he kept moving forward.

Battered. Bruised. Beaten.

Broken.

But never bowed.

Worlds would end and rise again long before Mikael ever gave up.

"What do you want?" When she said the words this time, even she was surprised by the acceptance in them. She still had no confidence in his ability to defeat her father, but Mikael was right.

What did she have to lose?

"I want to kill the devil," he said with a smile, realizing the implications in her tone. "And I need your help to do it."

******

Regarding search and rescue, Mercury was hands down the best Titan.

Her form didn't have to worry about air and smoke, it could flow through the tiniest cracks, and her shapeshifting allowed her to become anything needed to help civilians evacuate.

Mercury, the liquid that is, boiled at over six times the temperature of water. So long as she avoided active power lines or getting too much of her body separated, the heroine was one of the best heroes in the business.

This was why, despite Laura's call coming only a minute after their arrival, she had already rescued a half dozen trapped or injured men and women.

There was quite a bit of luck to it, Mercury would argue. She seemed to find those in need easily despite not possessing the enhanced senses of her teammates.

Nevertheless, she had evacuated the building incredibly quickly by the time she received the call and would have gone to aid X-23 right away had she not caught sight of a form shrouded in the shadows of the smoke.

"Help!" The man called out.

"I'm nearby," Mercury called out to her friend, moving back inside the building. "I'll be with you once I get this last guy out. Try to drag him into the open. The buildings are already unstable."

In times like this, Mercury was incredibly envious of Laura's mutation.

Healing, enhanced senses, and claws were soooo much better than shapeshifting and a body that couldn't feel anything.

Remembering the barbeque from yesterday, the one she couldn't eat, doubled the envy the young woman felt.

"Help!" The man called again, somehow even further from the entrance than before. Was he lost in the smoke?

"Here!" Mercury shouted, trying to draw him closer. "This way!"

A burning support beam fell on her, splattering her body across the floor.

It only took a moment to reform and press forward, but Mercury couldn't help but wish she had Starfire's strength and flight. She would have just caught the beam.

And she could have sex with her hot boyfriend.

One of many things Mercury would never experience.

From a hole in the wall, billowing smoke into the air, Mercury saw X-23 blast across the grass of the nearby park and the massive man chase after her.

Super strength would also be good.

Life just wasn't fair.

All thoughts of rescue were lost to the young woman as she watched the brief clash.

All she could think about was all the things they had that she didn't.

It wasn't fair.

She didn't even realize she was strangling her best friend and teammate.

******

"How?" She asked, still not believing she was going along with this absurdity. "He is literally invincible."

"He is," Mikael nodded. "Make no mistake, I am not underestimating Tri-hard in the least. If we were both at the peak of our powers, he would wipe the floor with me and most things in this dimension. I might have infinite power, but so does he. And he can bring more to bear at any given instant than I can. So I'd lose."

"You are not making me feel confident in your chances," Raven snarked, falling back on her default defensive response as she crossed her arms and glared up at him.

Why did he have to be so tall?

"I said that is only if I fought him at his peak," Mikael rolled his eyes. "I am not stupid. I do my homework. You forget we have the home-field advantage."

"What does that mean?"

"If Tri-Hard 2: Tri-Harder is so powerful, why can he not just barge in and wreck this dimension? Why does he need you?" Mikael asked rhetorically. "Dimensions have their own protections, walls that do not come down easily. On top of that, we have people like the Sorcerer Supreme who reinforce them and ward off intrusion attempts. To be honest, he should be here with you, not me, but," Mikael shrugged. "I haven't been too impressed with him lately. I get he is busy, but he is never around when you need him."

"Dimensional walls," Raven forced the man to refocus before he went on another tangent. "How do they help?"

"Right," Mikael continued. "Think of each dimension as a castle. Walls, defenders, standing armies, the whole nine yards. You can theoretically burst through the fortifications, but doing so is difficult and inefficient. Much easier to have someone on the inside to open the gate for you."

"Me," Raven said plainly, the pit in her stomach growing.

"Exactly," Mikeal smiled at her. "Whether you want to or not, you will lower the drawbridge to let him in."

At that moment, Raven wanted to die.

She wished she could just disappear, never to be seen again. To never be a threat to her

friends. To the home she had known and grown to love in the last few years.

She should never have been born.

"Jeez," Mikael sighed again.

Then he flicked her on the forehead.

Right on the Mark of Scaith.

"No need to cry," he said with a roll of his eyes. Raven glared up at him, rubbing her hurt head. "That's a better look on you. I hate damsels in distress. Even if the world ends, you should face it with a glare, a pun, and a middle finger. Not with tears."

"Fuck you," Raven snarled, a floating book smacking into his head.

He didn't flinch, just smiled down at her.

"There you go," Mikael smiled at her before continuing. "I wouldn't feel bad if I were you. He would just have a different kid even if you died or were never born. When dealing with beings of that power and longevity, it is not a matter of if but when. At least until they are put down for good."

"So, how do we do that?" Raven asked, feeling more desperate than ever before.

******

Winman focused on keeping the woman steady as she lay on his hoverboard. Its program would follow him, but she had thrashed in her pain enough that he was worried she would fall.

Since her lower half had been crushed by part of the roof, getting her back on the board would take time.

Time better spent saving others from the wreckage.

The focus was easy to achieve for a tinker, even for Chris.

Long hours in a Tinker Fugue contrasted heavily with his struggles in class due to his dyscalculia.

The focus was what he needed now.

Focus on not paying attention to the screams. The crying. The begging.

The still bodies he stepped over.

The blood on his hands.

Ignore the woman lying limply on his board, her eyes glassy and empty.

Ignore the man wailing to the sky as he caught sight of her.

Ignore the guilt of leaving the still-warm body with the grieving husband.

Focus.

Focus on directing his drones.

Focus on the next building.

Focus on being a hero.

It was an innocuous thing that knocked the focus so dearly gained from Winman's mind.

A penny.

Right side up.

Lying there on the sidewalk in front of a store. The afternoon sun and the flickering flames glinted off of it, drawing the hero's attention.

Winman pocketed it absentmindedly as he rushed into the building.

It was supposed to be good luck.

But his focus had been lost.

The front of the next store was thankfully already empty, but Winman was ready to dive deeper into the wreckage, just in case, when another small detail caught his eye.

The cash register had fallen in the chaos and popped open. Cash and coins spilled out over the ground.

A drone gathered it all in a few seconds.

It wasn't like anyone would miss it. If Chris didn't take it, it would just burn.

And he had been eyeing a new pair of shoes anyway.

No one else was in the building, even after he had his drones sweep again to be safe.

It also gave him time to empty the safe.

Winman was detaching the golden watch from a limp wrist when he heard the crash from the front of the store.

Followed by the distinctive roar of the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Beast Boy.

He wanted the money!

Not if Winman had anything to say about it.

It was his!

Well, it would be when no one was alive to take it from him.

******

"Going back to our castle example, even if you open the gate and drop the bridge, it doesn't mean he wins right away," Mikael explained. "He still has to go through the process of conquering, of making the castle his. Until he does so, no matter how large the gate, he still can't bring his whole force to bear. Power and army both. If he could, the sheer wave of manpower from multiple universes would be enough to drown this one instantly."

“So, he’s weaker on this side and can’t bring a huge army over.” Raven summarized, beginning to see where the Elden Lord was going with this plan.

“Right,” Mikael nodded. “There will be a brief period where he is in our dimension where his power is still infinite, but he will not be able to channel the same amount. Where he can’t bring everything to bear because the dimensional walls will still be in place. He wouldn’t want to either, lest he risk his already conquered dimensions being attacked by other multi-dimensional foes. The problem with wars of conquest is you always have to worry about multiple fronts opening up in your back if you overextend. Once he wins, he can focus on consolidating this dimension with his others. Until then, he is vulnerable in a way he would never be in his own home worlds.”

“Ok,” Raven turned his words over in her mind. There was still a major, obvious flaw to this plan. “That doesn’t mean you can beat him.”

“It does,” Mikael shook his head. “I will be able to bring more to bear than he will. That is how a home-field advantage works.”

“How do you know?”

“Because one of my wives has dealt with Three’s Company before,” Mikael shrugged. “I haven’t seen any proof that this version differs from the other. And, as I said, we have nothing to lose since he’s coming either way. If I do find I can’t win, whelp, at least I tried. I’ll take my Family and peace out.”

“You’d leave?” Raven asked, for some reason feeling oddly hurt.

“Of course,” Mikael gave her an odd look. “Why would I stay and die? If there is no choice, I’m all for fighting to the end, but you’d be surprised how often running away is a valid option. It’s the end of your world, not mine. This isn’t the first world I’ve left to doom, either. But don’t worry, it won’t come to that. I have a lot of tricks. So let’s kill satan. Or at least a version of him. Satan zero point two: demonic doo doo, if you will.”

Raven didn’t know what to say to that.

Mikael wasn’t wrong, she knew that, but at the same time, it didn’t sit easily with her.

Thankfully, the Elden Lord continued.

“Now, we come to the part I need your help with. The entire reason we’re having a little pow-wow now is because there is something you can do to help. That, and I wanted to let you know I’m going to gank your dad. I’m nice like that.”

******

Fire was not a good matchup for Beast Boy.

Ignoring that most of his instincts were urging him to flee, the simple fact was that

most animals did not deal well with fire.

Fur burned just as easily as flesh.

Beast Boy ignored the sting of the flames with the long experience of someone who'd been doing heroics since he was a child.

A trick Mento had taught him, counting down from one hundred and skipping all prime numbers, helped him keep his transformation up as the last of the evacuees rushed away.

Once done, however, Beast Boy let his burden fall and turned back from his gorilla form to put out the flames on his costume and blow off his singed hands.

Fun fact: pain hurt.

The green hero let out a coughing chuckle a the joke, deciding to remember that one for later during training with Shishou.

"Status of the Safeway?" He asked in his communication with his teammates.

No one answered.

They must all be occupied.

Even as his eyes watered from the pain and smoke, Garfield turned into a hummingbird and flew to the grocery store. Rising air currents caused by the fires made flying not impossible, so long as he chose the appropriate animal.

Landing in the destroyed entrance, Beast Boy transformed back again.

"Is there anyone in there?" He shouted before turning into a monkey and scrambling inside. He climbed over the fallen isles and smashed produce, idly popping a grape in his tiny mouth as he continued to look around.

No-one.

Someone else must have already cleared it, Beast Boy thought, munching on a pop tart.

Better safe than sorry.

Besides, he was a bit hungry.

The green hero spent a few minutes checking the break room, the office, and even the bathrooms. He also lifted up or slithered under the fallen isles in case anyone was unconscious under them.

Empty.

Beast-Boy was about to leave the building to rendevous with the others and capture the perpetrator when the most delectable smell he had ever sniffed wafted into his nose.

Well, second most delectable smell.

Beast-Boy didn't think anything he ever ate would top the barbeque from yesterday.

With his stomach rumbling, the green man threw aside the half-eaten watermelon to

find where that delicious scent was coming from.

He found its origin in a still bubbling vat of oil in the deli.

Eagerly, he lifted the pan from the vat and grabbed hold of the crispy delight in it, uncaring that his flesh sizzled from the intense heat of the metal.

Beast Boy moaned in satisfaction as he shoved the chicken tenders in his mouth.

The only issue was they were a bit too crispy. They had been in the oil too long.

They needed to be fresh.

Beast Boy became a wolf and ripped through an entire pack of raw hamburgers. Then a steak. Then a chicken.

It wasn't enough.

It was old. It had been frozen.

Fresh meat.

Fresh meat.

So hungry.

So very hungry.

As he chewed on a link of sausages, Beast Boys enhanced senses caught a particularly loud scream from outside.

He froze.

Fresh meat!

Leaving the half-eaten meal behind, Beast-Boy dashed for the exit, transforming into one of the largest carnivores the planet had ever known as he did so.

FRESH MEAT!

******

"What should I do," Raven asked, ignoring his last few sentences with the skill of someone who lived with Beast Boy and Winman.

"We need to make sure to capitalize on our advantage. We do that by setting the stage in our favour. I don't need to tell you that it will be destructive if I throw down with the ol' four eyes. We don't want that. So we need to choose an appropriate battlefield."

"Where?"

"Here," Mikael said, spreading his arms and gesturing around the room.

It didn't even take a second for Raven to realize what he was talking about.

"Titan Tower?" She asked in disbelief.

"The ocean around it, to be more specific," he corrected with a shrug. "So long as we keep the showdown to over the water, I can promise nobody will die. If not, I will need to be

concerned about civilian casualties and not able to fight at full power. Your job is easy. When the time comes, you need to be in, or near, Titan Tower."

"How will I know when it's time?"

"I expect it will be pretty obvious," Mikael smirked. "Either the portal will burst from you like the chest-burster from hell, ha, or he will use minions. It will likely be the latter. World conquering invasions requires certain dramatics. Malevolent rituals, blood sacrifices, Latin chanting, that sort of thing. Assume any incident tomorrow is a trap set to capture you. Your job is to be caught as close to the ocean as possible. The tower would be best, so stay here unless necessary, but near the port would work if you can't manage it. I'll take care of clearing personnel."

"If it's a trap, we should tell the others," Raven said, but Mikael shook his head. "We won't tell them about him, just that it is a trap."

"Then they'd ask a bunch of questions you can't answer," Mikael continued to shake his head. "Remember, you need to be captured. We need them to succeed. Your teammates would never allow that to happen. And if we told them the truth, they'd get the League and other heroes involved. Who would also interfere and, since we have less than a day, we don't have time to persuade them. This is our only chance to control the battlefield. I promise you, none of your friends will die. Neither will you. No matter what happens."

Raven hesitated. She was torn between hiding her shame from her friends or telling them that the shady godslaying dragon was trying to convince her to help summon her satanic father so he could kill him.

Mikael's words sealed her choice like a devil on her shoulder, whispering in her ear.

"If this works like I want it to," the Elden Lord said. "You will never have to worry about Tommy the Lightish Red ever again."

"Ok," Raven took a deep breath, steeling herself. "Ok. We'll do it your way. I won't tell anyone, and I'll stay in the tower. If I need to leave, I'll lure them back. How do you know they, whoever they are, won't just bring me somewhere else?"

"Like us, they only have one chance," Mikael explained. "If they can teleport, they might bring you away, but if they can, we wouldn't be able to stop them and will just have to deal with it. If they can't, then the tower is an excellent place to summon Timmy the Toddler since he is a big bastard. A respectable demon lord needs elbow room, you know."

"You have an answer for everything," Raven snarked.

"What can I say," Mikael pretended to buff his nails on his shirt. "I am very… thorough. I only do something risky with a plan. And this one is one of my best."

"We're going to die," Raven deadpanned. "We are all going to die. But what the hell. Might as well go out with a bang."

“That’s the spirit,” Mikael grinned at her.

“By the way,” Raven said, realizing something that should have been obvious. “How come nobody has come here? We haven’t been subtle, and I know Nightwing is watching you.”

“I’ve covered us in an illusion since I sat with you. Another thing one of my wives has been teaching me,” Mikael shrugged. “As far as they know, I annoyed you to eat dinner and then you stormed off. ‘I’ have been watching Scathach take out her annoyance on your friends since.”

“If you don’t want them to find out about this meeting, you will need to help me fix my room. It’s a mess.”

“Fix what,” Mikael tilted his head in question. As he spoke, the room around Raven shimmered, and, in an eye blink, it was back to its pristine form. “Nothing happened.”

Then he was gone, dissolving into pale blue starlight.

Within Raven’s chest, the most insidious of demons grew.

The one demon she had been fighting her entire life but would never destroy.

Hope.

******

Nightwing’s ‘defeat’ was the quickest and most understandable.

Even his former mentor, Batman, would have fallen for it.

In an emergency situation, when you find a man crumpled on the ground in a heap but still alive, you should rescue him, right?

It’s what a hero would do, after all.

And if he doesn’t respond to your calls, you should pick him up and carry him to the exit. That is just common sense.

Not that the lanky man was hefty.

In fact, he was incredibly skinny.

Skellatal, really.

Like he hadn’t eaten in weeks.

Nightwing would need to remember to tell the paramedics to take extra care.

Once he got outside, of course.

It seemed so far away.

Almost not worth the effort.

Nightwing put one foot in front of the other, purposefully at first.

Then steadily.

Then occasionally.

Then he stopped.

Five feet from the door.

This was good enough, wasn't it?

There was hardly any fire here. And the ceiling looked like it would still hold up for another half an hour.

Plenty of time for a break.

A small breather.

Nightwing had been tired a lot recently.

He had been dealing with Batman's paranoia, intense training, spying on a country-sized dragon, and making sure his teammates were dealing with things.

Then this happened.

He deserved a break, didn't he?

Nightwing worked hard. Harder than most heroes.

All the buildings had been searched, right? He'd been keeping track until just a while ago.

Any that he missed, the others would get.

No one had to know if he just took a break.

A quick nap.

Five minutes. Ten max.

And he was sooo comfortable here.

Sure his beard was itchy, and his clothes were tight around his bulging stomach, but that was fine.

The ground was warm, and a piece of metal was as good a pillow as anything Bruce used.

He'd slept in worse places during his training.

With heavy eyelids, Nightwing watched the smoke rise into the night sky.

Oh, look. That was Raven.

Man, look at her work.

Nightwing's eyes drooped some more.

He didn't see the green star-bolt smash into her from behind.

He didn't see Raven fall from the sky.

Nightwing was already asleep.

******

**

He was perfect.

The perfect man had never existed before Him. He was as tall as her, with dark hair

and pale skin. His pointed ears and four red eyes gave Him an otherworldly charm that was just… perfect.

“Can you do something for me, Starfire?” He was so kind, asking her.

She’d do anything for Him.

Anything.

“Yes!” She chirped happily.

He smiled at her, and she almost melted into a pile of pleasure.

“I need to talk to Raven.” Starfire barely registered a massive man walking up to them, four red eyes glowing in malicious joy as he crushed a car between his hands. Her eyes were locked onto Him. “Bring her to me. Quickly.”

“Yes, sir!” She saluted like Boyfriend Nightwing asked her to do. She hoped this made Him happy.

Then she flew off to do as He asked.

She felt terrible for Friend Raven, but He had asked her to be quick.

So she was.

The star bolt caught her teammate in the back, disrupting her concentration and causing her to cry out in pain as she fell.

Starfire caught her.

“Sorry, Friend Raven,” the tamaranean apologized happily, carrying the goth by one of her legs. “Please be coming with me.”

“Wha-” the pale-skinned woman grunted in pain and confusion.

They didn’t have far to go.

Starfire found Him right where she had left Him. Waiting for her.

There were two more men with Him, all four eyes and pointy-eared, but they didn’t matter.

Only He did.

“Hello, sister,” He said to Raven.

Were they family?

Was Friend Raven going to be Sister Raven?”

“What did you do to her,” Sister Raven asked Him. Only she did it rudely. If she wasn’t His sister, Starfire would have hit her. Instead, the alien dropped her to the ground and looked to Him for approval.

“Go find my other brother,” He ordered her. Starfire was happy to do so, though she wished He would look at her instead of Sister Raven. “You’ll find him by your leader. Probably asleep.”

“Yes, sir!” Starfire saluted again, happy to be of service.

Dick would understand.

He was perfect.

******

Raven watched Starfire fly away, the guilt and fear in her all-consuming.

What had she done?

She should never have listened to the Elden Lord.

But the die had been cast.

Now she truly had nothing to lose.

“What did you do to Starfire,” Raven demanded, standing before the four unfamiliar men.

Sons of Trigon.

Her brothers.

“Honestly, I barely even talked to her,” the man controlling Starfire shrugged with a casual smirk. “You know how mortals are. They’d do anything for a pretty face.”

Raven’s teeth clenched in anger as they laughed.

“She’s still better than the other two girls,” he continued. “Envy and Wrath barely had to even do anything, and they were tearing each other apart.”

“I wanted to kill them,” the massive one made out of muscle and rage snarled. “So easy. Squish. Like bug.”

The others laughed harder.

“Do you want to see some pictures?” The one in a suit and tie held out his phone for her to see. Even from feet away, Raven could see Winman rifling through the purse. Beside him lay the corpse of the previous owner. “You like it? I have discovered I am quite fond of this world’s ‘social media’. I do believe it will get quite a few ‘likes’.”

They howled in mirth.

Raven clutched her fists so tightly that she felt her nails pierce her skin.

“The green one had to be the stupidest,” the fat one joked. “‘I don’t eat meat’. He does now!”

No matter how annoyed Raven had been yesterday, it absolutely paled before the absolute rage she felt at that moment.

She wanted to kill them.

To smash their faces into the concrete and bury them beneath the debris.

Raven wanted to tear her brothers limb from limb, to see their laughing faces contort in pain and agony.

At that moment, it did not matter that Raven had lost control of her emotions.

There was nothing left to destroy.

“Here you are, sir,” Starfire announced as she arrived, carrying a lanky man in her arms.

The man, long-haired and in a leather jacket, looked asleep as he crumbled to the floor and stayed there.

Not out of weakness but pure laziness.

“Now that we’re all here and have had our fun,” Lust smirked at Raven, his arm wrapping around her teammate and fondling a breast. Starfire moaned in pleasure. “Let’s get down to business.”

“It is time to fulfill your destiny, dear sister,” Greed smirked down at her.

“Never!” Raven snarled as she gathered her magic.

Screw the Elden Lord’s plan.

She was killing them here and now and rescuing her friends.

All fear, guilt and despair disappeared as rage consumed her.

They would not get away with this.

Raven would have thrown herself into the fight, heedless of the wisdom of her actions if a hand hadn’t been gently but firmly placed on her shoulder.

Raven froze.

“That is quite enough,” Glynda Goodwitch silenced the Sons of Trigon with a glare.

For the first time, the blonde huntress let Raven feel her emotions.

Concern for her and her team.

Anger at the men in front of them.

Love for the woman at her side.

Exasperation at the man waiting for a plan to come together.

But not one ounce of fear.

“A teacher has a duty to correct their students when they take the wrong path,” Glynda said, the shopping center repairing itself behind her. “And to excise bad influences.”

“I just think this will be fun,” Scathach twirled her spear with a bloodthirsty smirk. “I will be making sure they understand where they failed tomorrow. For now, I do hope you put up a fight.”

“We don’t have to fight,” Lust smiled at the pair, stepping forward with a hand extended. “Come here.”

Glynda raised an eyebrow.

Scathach was more direct.

“Argh!” Lust screamed in pain, staggering back and clutching the stump of his right arm.

His brothers just watched, unsympathetic in the least for his plight.

“I dislike men of style and no substance,” Scathach said, tossing the severed limb over her shoulder casually. “Now, will you make this interesting or not?”

“How’s this for interesting, you bitch!” Lust snarled, red magic gathering in his good hand.

He released the energy, not towards them, but to the sky over the nearby park.

The red energy tore through the afternoon sky like a comet before vanishing into thin air over Glen Canyon Park.

There was a beat of silence.

“Was that supposed to do something?” Glynda asked, unimpressed.

No sooner had the huntress spoken that a hole was torn in reality.

Taller than a sky scrapper and as wide as the park, it glowed a malevolent red and orange. Like a bloody wound in the sky, it pulsed and bled angrily.

Looking at it physically hurt Raven.

“Your *husband*,” Lust spat the word like a curse. “Made things easy for us. It has never been easier to breach the Walls. Now choose. Try and stop us, or try and protect this pathetic city. No matter what, we win.”

As he spoke, demons poured from the tear in the sky. Big ones, small ones, scally, furry. Countless variants from countless conquered worlds. Some beautiful enough to make you cry. Others were horrific enough to make your eyes bleed.

The screaming started immediately.

Scathach was gone in an instant, leaping skyward and spears impaling a demon she used as a springboard to ascend higher.

She smiled the whole way.

Her husband gave her the best presents.

Glynda continued to stare at Raven’s brothers, still unimpressed.

“Is that it?” She asked, feeling underwhelmed. If it was, they were making her life hard. How was she supposed to play along if they were this pathetic?

She hoped they had more to offer.

“No,” Lust snarled once more. “This is. Kill her!”

Starfire charged.

The Titans, baring Nightwing, who had gathered under the influence of the Sons of Trigon, also charged.

Glynda sighed.

“Run,” the blonde told Raven. She spoke as if asking someone to do their homework. “I shall take this opportunity to give them a ‘midterm’. We will be going over their and your performance tomorrow. I expect you to be there.”

Then Winman tried to blast her with a cannon.

Raven didn’t see the result.

She was already fleeing toward the ocean.

Six demons chased her, but the most insidious one was in her heart.

Unlike yesterday, this flight was over in seconds, though it covered half a city.

It was the difference between running towards something compared to running away.

The ocean, glittering in the sun, had never looked so beautiful to Raven.

It was then, when Raven felt joy at the blue waters, and her hope was at its peak, that a massive body smashed her from the sky.

She crashed into the beach, the air leaving her lungs in the brutal halt of momentum.

A hand, steely and implacable, held her head in place.

Blinking the black spots from her eyes and fighting to remain conscious, Raven’s blurry vision struggled to make sense of what she was seeing.

Superman?

What?

“Hello, sister.” Four red eyes on the famous Kryptonian face told Raven that this was no hero. “So good of you to visit. I’ve been waiting a while.”

“Envy,” Greed greeted casually as the five men arrived, Sloth slung over Wrath’s shoulders. “Everything good?”

“I had enough time to set up and enough materials at hand,” he answered, still holding Raven’s head down into the sand.

“Then we should get this show on the road,” Greed said, crouching down and tweaking Raven’s nose with a smug smirk.

“You knew where I was going,” Raven realized.

“Of course we did.” Envy raised Raven to her feet, still holding her fast. “Just like we know your little plan with the dragon. Daddy dearest has been keeping a very close eye on you. The Elden Lord made that possible when he weakened the Walls.”

They were in a large ritual circle, spread roughly over the sand using gallons of blood. A dozen nearby bodies were its clear source.

“He’s very proud,” Sloth said slowly, his voice an uninterested drawl.

“Trying to cheat Trigon the Terrible,” Lust shook his head in mock disbelief. “We couldn’t believe it when he told us.”

“So we had to try it ourselves,” Gluttony said, binding one of her arms to a crude

metal cross. Wrath roughly did the same to her other. Envy prevented any escape with his firm hold on her skull. “Only we’re hunting dragons AND demons. And you are bait for both. Or did you not notice how we had something planned for both of your ‘teachers’.”

Surrounded by six demonic siblings in a ritual circle made from the blood of the innocent while they casually explained how they would crush a plan that was already a gamble, Raven felt her last fleeting spark of hope die.

She gave up, sagging against the bonds of her crucifix.

“Time to fulfill your destiny, dear sister,” Greed repeated, plunging a dagger into Raven’s chest.

She didn’t resist.

Like all the worst demons, hope fled right when it was needed.

Author's Note:

Sorry for the late release, IRL stuff kept me. I also didn't have time to do all the edits I wanted, but I am pretty happy with it.

Won't say much. Next week will be the finale of Furlough. I'll see you then.

FURLOUGH VII

In you I know we'll find!
The hero of our time!
An evil king has come to reign!
All that you know
You'll be leaving it behind
Look deep inside
Soon enough you'll find
The courage to win
Now you'd best be on your way
For you have a demon to slay!

Raven was still alive as Greed pulled her beating heart from her chest.

She felt no pain.

It seemed like she was disconnected from her body, and everything was swimming. Like everything was happening to someone else, she was just watching, helpless to move.

Probably in shock, she distantly realized.

She would die soon.

As she deserved.

"What now?" A voice from behind her asked.

"Father is on his way," Greed responded, still holding her beating heart. Blood flowed from the organ onto the ritual circle at their feet, oddly black and unending. "We have a few minutes max before he gets here. We must finish the ritual by then if we want to absorb his power."

"Do we still need Raven?" The voice asked.

In her haze, Raven thought it sounded familiar. A rumbling tone that sparked annoyance in her delirious thoughts.

Couldn't she at least die in peace?

"Damnit, Jack! Get off your lazy ass," Lust cursed. "She's the portal. The key. She holds more of his power than any of us. We do this now! We must absorb him before the dragon gets here, or we're fucked."

"How do we do that?"

"You didn't read it?!" Wrath rumbled. Raven saw, more than felt, her crucifix shift as the giant took a massive step forward.

"Get back in place!" Greed ordered, now glowing with red power. The heart in his hand was beating faster and faster.

Wrath did as he was told, but not before glaring down at the man crumpled in the

sand behind Raven.

"Just…" Lust said, visibly restraining himself from saying anything else. "Just focus on channelling magic to the heart. It connects to her and, through her, to him. When he arrives, pull all you can back. That will drain him to us."

"Isn't Tri-hard with a vengeance watching right now?"

What.

"Hah," Envy snorted, the expression looking out of place on Superman's face.

"I'm blocking him from looking through her eyes. Have been since we caught her," Gluttony responded. He was the only one not in the circle. "Don't want to ruin the surprise."

Both of them were glowing brighter and brighter. The entire circle was burning an eery red, as were four of its five male inhabitants. They were all positioned in a pentagram overlaid on the Mark of Skath carved into the beach. There were other magical markings, ones she didn't recognize, but Raven was too busy watching her still-beating heart be ripped from her chest to care too much.

The exception out of her brothers was the lanky figure with long black hair in ripped jeans and a leather jacket that lay sprawled in the sand behind her body.

He hadn't moved since Wrath had dropped him in place.

How… was she seeing this?

Her eyes were closed?

Weren't they?

There was still no pain.

Like she hadn't even been hurt.

Or had already been healed.

Raven felt the sensation of vertigo intensify as the red light grew brighter.

"What about the dragon? What's the plan for him?"

"We kill him," Wrath snarled. "Now shut up! Do your job!"

"But how? He's very big and strong. And have you seen his scales? They are very shiny."

"Even if he could fight father, which he probably can't," Greed said, not taking his eyes off the heart. The blood had turned into bloody red fire and dripped onto the sand. "He won't be able to stand up to all six of us with his power. With the book, if we can kill or subdue him, we can drain his power as well. We'll be unstoppable."

"That's it? That's all you got? The trick with the Titans was pretty well thought out, so I was hoping for more. To kill such a handsome, powerful, handsome, funny, handsome, dashing, and handsome dragon? What about the rest of the Family? Please tell me you

have a good plan for them that isn't 'Sons of Trigon go bonk'."

What.

"…what?" Greed asked, finally looking away from his prize to stare at his slothful brother.

Or where Sloth had been.

Mikael was still sprawled out on the ground, but that was the only point that remained the same between the truth and the illusion.

He was closer to Raven, for one. His back rested against the cross on which she was tied, and his shoulders leaned against her legs. Rather than wear torn jeans and a leather jacket, he was wearing shorts and a god-awful floral print shirt that burned Raven's eyes with its bright colours.

He looked like a beach bum in Hawaii rather than an ancient dragon lying in the center of a bloody ritual.

"All I'm saying," he said with a shrug and a smile. "Is that you had a good idea but poor execution. You are a few million years too young to be scheming against me, you young whipper snappers. Back in my day, when we tried to kill and absorb the powers of demons and dragons, we did it with skill. Finesse. And a massive sword. Unnecessarily large, really. Let me give you all a lesson. I call it Mikael's SSSSS class."

Wrath bellowed in rage, unable to handle the taunting and stomped forward to grab at the smirking man.

He made it one step.

Then he exploded in a shower of gore, magic, and pale moonlight. So close to the exploding mass of flesh, Mikael and Raven were covered in the gore.

His floral print shirt somehow looked better this way.

"Huh? That's interesting," he murmured so low to himself as he looked down at his ruined clothes that Raven was sure she was the only one who heard him.

Then he shook his head slightly and refocused on the group around him.

"See," Mikael smirked, holding the massive greatsword made of moonlight in one hand, the other slung around Raven's shoulder casually. When had he stood up? "Kids these days. So impatient. Back to the lecture. In my opinion, SSSSS is how you can determine a victor of any fight. The least important is the first S. Strength. If you only have strength or power, you end up like poor Wrath. Chunky salsa."

Envy glared lasers at the man.

That wasn't an expression.

The Son of Trigon literally fired a laser from Superman's eyes at Mikael's head.

Ba-bump.

Then his head exploded as a bluish-black magic missile impacted the back of his skull in a shower of blood, bone, and grey matter.

“You should have turned into the Flash,” Mikael said casually. He had only moved slightly to get out of the heat vision. “Then it might have been a bit interesting. Laser eyes are easy to predict if I know where you are looking. That is another S, by the way. Speed. I would take greater speed over strength any day of the week.”

In seconds, Raven had gone from being surrounded by six Sons of Trigon to only three.

Ba-bump.

Gluttony seemed frozen, paralyzed by the change in the situation.

Greed and Lust, to their credit, did not freeze. They made a judgment call.

Without Trigon’s power, they couldn’t beat the Elden Lord, so they needed to summon Trigon.

Quickly.

Thankfully, they had the perfect distraction.

“You want this,” Greed smirked, holding the heart to the Elden Lord’s eyes. It glowed black and red and pulsated with power. Greed seemed to squeeze every drop of magic he could into the heart, and its palpitations sped up.

Ba-bump.

Ba-bump.

Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.

Ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump ba-bumpba-bumpba-bumpba-bumpbabumpbabumpbabumpbabump.

Faster and faster, the heartbeat pounded. The sound grew louder and louder. The sand on the beach started to hop and bounce from the vibration.

The light was so intense that Raven should have needed to shield her eyes.

She didn’t.

Somehow, she could still see clearly, even with the harsh glare of the red light.

She saw Greed throw the heart over the ocean with a mighty toss.

“Fetch!” Greed ordered.

Mikael didn’t move.

“The third S is the situation.” He lectured. “This accounts for terrain and defences, as well as hostages and other points of victory. Leveraging your situation is critical to any successful conflict. A nice try, but you cannot understand my greed. That and your abilities don’t work on me. You failed to account for your one true victory point in this situation.”

Mikael lightly stomped on the sand.

The ground rumbled.

Lust died, impaled groin first on a massive pillar of stone that arose below him.

“If I were you, I would have paid more attention to the fact I have stayed by Raven’s side, keeping her alive this entire time. If you all had come at me at once or managed to separate me from her, I would have had much greater trouble than I did. Now there are only two of you left.”

“Argh!” Gluttony screamed, his rotund body lifted in the air by red and black briars of thorns formed from the blood of the citizens slain.

The Briars squeezed, drawing another scream of agony from the corpulent man.

From the thorns, a swarm of bloody flies erupted and turned upon the feast of flesh.

The blood flies devoured Gluttony.

Blood, fat, and viscera rained on the beach.

“My mistake,” Mikael said with a shrug. “Only one left. Although now I am a bit bummed. I’m not going to be able to finish my lecture.”

Greed turned toward the city and fled.

He made it five steps before a golden shockwave knocked him backwards.

He slid to a stop at Mikael’s feet.

Raven could see the fear and rage in his eyes.

“The penultimate S is skill. The culmination of not only experience but also the talent and the control one has over their own abilities,” Mikael droned with a smile, golden light starting to radiate from him. “With enough skill, one can overcome almost anything. And I have a lot of skills. It’s great when I want to inflict some truly ironic deaths.”

“You cannot stop him,” Greed glared up at the man. “He will come, and he will kill you.”

The cambion tried to stand, but a foot on his chest kept him firmly pressed into the sand.

“Nah,” Mikael waved off the words. “I’m sure he’ll try. But better than him, have failed. Before I do something funny to you, I should thank you. I’m sure there are videos of what you all did at the mall. Plus, this little ritual site. I’ve been racking my brain for days on who I could kill that wouldn’t ruin my reputation. It’s been really hard to find the right target. Not killing things isn’t really an option. I don’t want to seem like one of those people who is all talk and no substance. That would just be embarrassing.”

Greed continued to struggle as the man rambled, but there was no escape.

“So thank you for not only pissing me off but for mastering one of the most beloved Protectorate teams in the country. That’s a Kill Order right there. I don’t think anyone will want to mess with my Family now. I just wish you had made it more fun.”

“You’re a monster,” Greed spat up at the abomination in the shape of a man. “Worse than any of us.”

“Sure I am,” Mikael’s smile was gentle, almost pitying. “There are two differences, though. One, I am smart. Two, I am handsome. People are much more willing to work with a pretty monster.”

Then he laid his hand on Greed’s forehead.

The four-eyed man froze, face contorting in pain.

Crystal burst from below his skin, but not a drop of blood fell from the wound. Multiple blueish-green crystals grew from, through, in, and over the Son of Trigon until he was nothing more than a statue in the vague shape of a man.

It was over in an instant.

“Huh,” Mikael grunted in amusement. “I didn’t know those that absorbed too much sorcery were still considered living. Medea will be ecstatic for the opportunity to test the properties of living glintstone. Greed should be happy too. He’s now the single most valuable crystal on the face of the planet.”

Ba-bump!

Ba-bump!

Ba-bump!

BA-BUMP!

The heart, still beating as it floated above the ocean’s waves, had grown loud enough for them to hear again. It was so bright now that its glow eclipsed the sun’s light.

Mikael looked at it curiously but then ignored it to turn to face Raven.

She had been strapped to the cross this entire time, her chest still open from where her heart had been carved out. Blood had flown freely at first, but without a heart, it had stopped circulating.

“I have Freed your consciousness from the limits of your body for the moment,” Mikael told her. “Do not panic. I must remain in contact with you at all times. I am keeping you alive. My wife will be able to heal this. You will be fine. If you need to talk, your magic should still work. Just spell out any words for me. I know this isn’t pretty, but you must see what happens next.”

BA-BUMP!

While that explained much, it did not make Raven feel that much better.

‘What about my friends? Are they okay?’

The words formed themselves in the air before the man, made of dark light.

“They’re fine,” he said, untying her from the cross and throwing her limp form over a shoulder. Raven should have been insulted by how disrespectfully he treated her ‘corpse’,

but she honestly had bigger things to worry about. That, and she still felt nothing. “Glynda is with them. She would have messaged me if anything happened.”

BA-BUMP!

‘Did you know this would happen? About my brothers?’

“I knew something would happen,” he admitted. “I told you as much yesterday. I did not know how it would go down or who would do it, though. And I definitely did not expect what happened to your friends, or I would have thought up a different plan. We came as soon as we could, which was pretty fast, all things considered.”

BA-BUMP!

‘Is that why you were so brutal?’

BA-BUMP!

“Guilty,” the man smirked at the words, looking the furthest thing from guilty as possible. “I really don’t like Masters. If it had been possible for your teammates to resist, I wouldn’t be so mad.” **BA-BUMP!** “But it wasn’t. Your brothers weren’t tempting them to fall into sin. They were outright controlling them. A big nono.”

BA-BUMP!

‘What now?’

“Now?” **BA-BUMP!** “We watch the fireworks.”

BA-BUMP!

BA-

Silence.

For one frozen instant, it was like the world held its breath.

Then the heart exploded in the cataclysm of flames and shadow, a circle of fire forming atop the ocean’s water.

“THE”

An arm, covered in red scales and ending in claws, burst from the flaming circle.

“EARTH”

A second arm tore free from the depths of flame. Both massive red arms pressed into the ocean bottom and pushed. Waves as tall as buildings rose and fell in the turbulent disturbance.

“IS”

An enormous head rose from the depths. Crowned by antlers and a long white mane of hair, his four red eyes glowed with firey power as he crowed his triumph.

Even with ocean water up to his shins, the Lord of Madness still towered over the city like a titan.

And he grew larger with every second.

“MINE!”

Trigon the Terrible was here.

It was the end of the world.

“Sasageyo! Sasageyo! Shinzou wo sasageyo!”

Which was why Raven could not stop herself from asking the question.

‘Are you seriously singing right now?’

“I regret nothing! The moment was too perfect! I live as few men dare to dream!”

******

Laura was the first to be released from her mind control.

One moment she was lunging for Beast Boy’s throat, easy to do since he was a brontosaurus, and the next, she froze mid-step.

Glynda let the crystal shield around the green hero’s neck fade once she saw the mutant stop her lunge.

Fighting the Titans hadn’t been hard, as skilled and powerful as they were.

Keeping them alive while they attacked her, each other, and any nearby civilians, while also repairing the damage to nearby structures, had been the real challenge.

Glynda could only do so because of her extensive training with Observation Haki, the unparalleled control of her semblance, and her long experience dealing with violent teenagers.

That, and Glynda Goodwitch was just that good.

Laura, frozen in the moment of her liberation, was an easy target for Mercury.

The liquid metal mutant poured over her friend, silvery material covering X-23’s head as Mercury tried to drown her.

Glynda grimaced in concentration even as she used one of Winman’s drones to block Starfire’s bolts. The metal contraption melted into slag but did its job.

Liquids were always more challenging to manipulate than solids with her semblance.

The huntress allowed Beast Boy to whip the pair with his long tail, knowing it wouldn’t cause any irreversible damage and focused on pulling the mercury from Laura’s throat, forcing her will against Mercury’s malleable form.

She also had to divide her attention on yanking Starfire’s arm so the plasma she released hit another of Winman’s guns rather than her.

On top of that, the teacher kept a part of her focus on the metal muzzle she had crafted around Beast Boy’s jaws using the frame of a destroyed car.

Then the green hero turned into a fly, and Glynda had to catch the mass of metal

before it hit anyone.

Thankfully, this was when Mercury stopped struggling.

The metal mutant fell from her friend's body into a silvery puddle on the floor, leaving Laura panting for breath.

Wolverine's daughter looked around frantically, eyes wide and dazed as she tried to take in her situation.

Then she lunged at Winman.

Glynda, noticing she had withdrawn her claws, didn't stop her.

Laura tackled her teammate, knocking him to the floor and easily overpowering him. She tore his gloves from his hands and the helmet from his head, then headbutted him for good measure, knocking him into a daze.

Beast Boy took this opportunity to turn from a fly into a blue whale above everyone's heads.

Glynda strained to keep the sheer bulk of the largest animal to ever live in the air. She couldn't just hold him up at one point, or his weight would tear him apart against the forces she pressed against him. Instead, she had to support every inch of the two-hundred-ton mammal.

This was complicated because Starfire, the only Titan to not attack the others and focus solely on her, flew under the green whale and carpet-bombed the area Glynda was standing in with green star fire.

Protecting herself with multiple destroyed cars for a moment, which quickly melted into slag under the force and heat, Glynda created a platform under her feet and rose into the air.

Flight was much more viable now that she only needed to focus on two enemies rather than five.

Glynda needn't have bothered.

Before Starfire could chase her teacher into the sky, the Tameranean froze in place like her teammates.

For a few seconds, her face contorted in confusion, then realization, then disgust, and finally wide-eyed fear.

"Nightwing!" Starfire shouted, dashing off to look for her boyfriend from where she had left him lying in a burning building.

Glynda knew he was fine, having kept a portion of her attention on protecting the sleeping man throughout this whole incident.

Winman was still struggling in X-23's grip, and Beast Boy, transformed from a blue whale into a leopard, was lunging at the back of Glynda's head with his jaws wide open.

She caught him easily, now able to dedicate her full attention to him.

For a few seconds, the green hero struggled in her telekinetic grasp transforming from the jaguar into a rhino, then a triceratops, then a fly, then a whale again.

Glynda never let him go, adjusting her hold on him in an eyeblink every time he transformed.

Then he froze in place, eyes unclouding from the voracious hunger that consumed them, and Glynda let him fall gently to the ground.

“Blegh!”

Where he promptly began vomiting all over.

“Where is Si- Friend Raven?” Starfire asked urgently, flying back with Nightwing in a bridal carry in her arms.

The leader of the Titans had it the best and worst of the heroes.

He had slept through the whole ordeal and had no injuries to speak of, but his physical changes were not reverting either. He still had a long scraggly beard and a large amount of fat, and he smelled terrible even from where Glynda was standing.

It would take him ages to get back into shape.

That, or they would let Amelia out of M/S confinement long enough to revert the changes.

“She is with my husband,” Glynda answered calmly, waiving her hand and pulling Winman from Laura’s grasp. He still struggled in her intangible hold but had even less success than Beast Boy. “He will take care of her.”

“What happened?” Laura grunted, looking disturbed and guilty. “I was angry. So angry.”

“You walked into a trap,” Glynda said, voice softening and looking over the Titans with well-hidden concern. “Your actions were not your own. Do not blame yourselves. Mikael and Raven can explain everything when it is over.”

“You know I didn’t mean it, right?” Mercury asked frantically, reforming her body beside X-23 and looking at her friend in desperate fear. “I mean I’d never- I was just- and you were- I just… I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry,” she apologized frantically.

Laura, eyes still staring into the distance vacantly, absently nodded her head.

“Oh god,” Winman muttered, freed from his own control. Glynda set him down, and he collapsed to his knees, staring at his hands in horror. “Oh god. What have I done? I took- Oh god.”

“You were controlled,” Glynda repeated, more severely this time, and all eyes turned to her. “Mastered. Your free will was stripped from you, and someone else took your place. You had no way to stop it, and no one will blame you except yourself and fools.”

“I guess we failed our midterms,” Beast Boy joked, but his eyes were haunted, and his lips were still stained with bile.

“I have not given them yet,” Glynda denied. “Your exam is this: recover. Rest. Talk to friends and family. Ask for help. We shall reconvene tomorrow evening. Whatever you decide to do following this ordeal, you will only fail my ‘midterm’ if you try to bear this negativity alone. And always remember. As your teacher, I am always here to listen.”

The Titans looked at each other and at her. They looked haunted, violated, guilty, and confused. For all their experience with heroism, for all their strength and skill, they were so very young to her eyes. Younger than most Beacon graduates.

Barely adults.

Young men and women who had chosen to take up the defence of the innocent and put their lives at stake for others.

Glynda had not become a teacher to raise heroes or huntsmen.

Glynda became a teacher to give people like them the skills they needed to come home. She accomplished this with a firm hand but guiding hand.

Sadly, most of her students only learned their lessons too late.

Glynda never stopped trying.

That is what it meant to be a teacher.

The moment of silence was interrupted when the monstrous voice roared its triumph over the city.

“THE EARTH IS MINE!”

The entire team tensed, assuming battle-ready stances as they looked around frantically for the source.

They could barely make out the top of the head of the red giant from their position.

“What the fuck was that?” Winman cursed, scrambling to re-don his helmet and gloves, which he used to control most of his devices.

“That,” Glynda responded with a small smile. “Was the sound of a plan coming together. If nothing else, take solace in knowing my husband will have vengeance for you.”

“The Elden Lord will fight that thing?” Mercury asked, eyes wide as she stared at the demon lord growing every second.

“Fight?” Glynda let the barest chuckle escape her before recomposing her expression. “There will be no fight. Make no mistake, Mikael is strong. Enormously so. But it has never been his power that made him dangerous. It is his mind.”

“Right,” Beast Boy let out a nervous chuckle before changing the subject. “Where is Shishou? Wasn’t she here earlier?”

“I wouldn’t worry about her either,” Glynda actually allowed a grin to form as she nodded behind them. The pulsing red tear in the sky remained even after its summoners had died. Demons continued to rain down, but none left the park’s confines.

Beast Boy looked to Glen Canyon Park, though it was still mostly hidden by the buildings Glynda had repaired. His eyes unfocused again for a moment, then he doubled over to regurgitate again.

“What the fuck is that?” The green hero asked in between heaves of nausea.

“Blood,” X-23 answered, nose scrunched up in disgust. “A lot of blood.”

“Knowing her, this is the most fun she has had in millennia,” Glynda said fondly.

The Titans looked at her oddly as Beast Boy continued to vomit.

******

What makes someone a hero?

If someone asked Scathach, her answer would be simple.

Strength, skill, and courage.

Morality or destiny were irrelevant.

A hero is someone with power and the will to use it.

And Scathach was a hero.

Her spear tip tore through the throat of a demon.

It fell from the sky in a rain of visceral meat and brackish blood.

It joined the dozens she had already slain, the blood seeping into the canyon ground from the bodies.

Three more flyers, each more grotesque than the other, descended on her as soon as they exited the pulsing hole in the walls of reality.

The first went down with two spears in its eyes.

The second fell when Scathach used the tip of a spear to carve a rune into its carapaced body faster than it could blink. A simple fire rune, with the skills of a master, boiled its flesh from its bones.

She ripped the wings from the third with her bare hands, riding its body to the ground and smiling the whole way.

Looking skyward, the celt took in the enemies that still covered the sky.

In the time it had taken her to kill two dozen, hundreds had exited the portal.

A few flew toward her, but most were making their way toward the city and its defenceless inhabitants. She noticed those who did get close to leaving the park fall and frowned at her Family’s interference.

That would not do.

An idea came to her.

Scathach's smile stretched in almost childish glee.

If Setanta could face an army alone, in one-on-one combat, she would meet them all at once.

First, separate the wheat from the chafe.

"Gae Bolg Alternative!"

The sky was red.

Red from the tear in the dimensional walls, as it pulsed and glowed ominously.

Red from the countless demons. The abominations that blotted the blue sky beyond with their numbers.

Red from the barbed spears, hundreds of them flying skyward in a hunt for death.

Red from the blood that rained from the sky in a waterfall. A torrent of demonic ichor drowned the once-green park in a flood of red.

The innumerable carcasses fell to the ground in a grotesque hail of bodies, limbs, and roars of pain.

Then the sky was blue once more.

If anyone else had been in her position, they would have taken this brief intermission before more demons emerged to transform.

Standing atop a pile of bodies surrounded by knee-deep pools of red liquid, there was no better battlefield for a Blood Dragon.

She could have used the power and size of her draconic body to block the portal of most of its escapees.

But Scathach was not anyone else.

She did not transform.

She was Scathach!

She did use her Element, but only as material for her spell.

The rivers of blood glowed as it flowed in complicated, archaic patterns that no one but her would understand.

When the next hoard of demons emerged from the portal, they no longer sought to enter the city to wreak havoc.

They couldn't break the Geass.

These new arrivals, bigger, meaner, stronger, and more horrific than the first wave, could only invade by climbing over her dead body.

It would not do for the student to surpass the master just yet.

Facing down an endless army by herself, Scathach smile deepened.

“I am Scathach,” she told the hoard, uncaring if they understood her. “Teacher of heroes. Queen of the Land of Shadows. I have felled demons, gods, even death itself.”

The army charged at her.

Fire and magic.

Flesh and muscle.

All bent to one purpose.

“Kill me if you can!”

She did not transform into a Blood Dragon when she charged.

Not when she slew the second wave of demons.

Not when the actual monsters, big enough to tower over skyscrapers and strong enough that the earth shook with their every movement, tore themselves from the portal.

Not when her Aura ran dry from her use.

Not when blows started to accumulate on her body, her Armament reducing the injuries to nothing but hitting nonetheless.

Numbers and attrition doing what quality could.

All the skills in the world and Haki could not prevent injury against the army of thousands, made up of some of the greatest champions of Trigon’s conquered dimensions.

Despite all that, the celt remained human.

Scathach never transformed as the piles of bodies became a hill, then a mountain, then two.

For she was Scathach!

With no unique heritage, prophecy to guide her life, and no world-renowned teacher to instruct her, Scathach had carved herself a place in the annals of human history through her efforts, strength, and skill alone.

She stood alone, a Warrior Queen against the greatest foes Trigon could throw at her from multiple hell dimensions.

Her bloody smile never left her lips.

She was Scathach, and turning into a dragon would just make her weaker.

******

In my opinion, the key to a good plan can be divided into three parts.

Control what you can.

Know what you can’t control.

Be prepared for when everything goes wrong.

Generally, you have almost complete control of yourself, decent control of allies and

the situation, and limited control of your enemies.

You never have absolute control.

Emotions, enemy action, or plain bad luck always mean that a situation will go tits-up when you don't want to.

Take this situation, for example.

I could exert pretty good control over my Family, at least to get them to go along with a plan. I had spent the last few days studying hard with Ranni and Medea on illusion magic to pull this plan off and get around my lack of defences against cameras. That was an easy part of the situation I could control, and it helped me form a half dozen contingency plans.

Raven, the younger one, would not follow my every order and would not trust me in the limited time I had. I had to be careful about how I dealt with her. By only talking to her on the evening of the last day, I limited the time she would have to go to second guess my plan.

She was also at her most desperate.

There was no way a calm and rational Raven would allow her team to wander into a trap without telling them.

It also served the purpose of controlling my enemy.

I knew they were watching her somehow, thanks to my Raven, though I didn't know at the time it was through her own eyes. Through their observation, I could exert limited control over them.

There is an old trick used when dealing with dictators, world leaders, or terrible bosses.

Show them a problem, then give them three solutions to fix it. If two of them are terrible, they will go for the third without fail and think it was their idea the whole time.

Especially if they think they are the smartest one in the room.

And, like me, villains tended to be egomaniacs.

I gave whoever was watching her everything they wanted.

They'd be able to lure her out of the tower without incident. This would free me from the constant observation by Batman and others without arousing their suspicions.

They'd be able to deal with the Titans however they wanted. This would also separate her teammates from her, limiting the variables when Trigon showed up.

They'd be able to set up a stable ritual site along the ocean. I honestly didn't know what exactly they would need as that changed based on the media that started Trigon, but I gave it good odds it would be needlessly complex.

By talking to the young Raven, I maximized what I could control.

Then there were the things I could not control.

I had no idea how or where they would lure the Titans too. I had just heard of Diamond Heights today, so I had no clue they would attack it.

I also had no idea who 'they' were.

Trigon would definitely have agents on this side, he'd be stupid not to, but I didn't know who they would be. Was it Deathstroke? Brother Blood? Cultists? Or even a host of demons?

I simply had no idea who, how many, or how strong Trigon's agents were.

The Sons of Trigon had been a possibility I had considered, so they weren't too big of a surprise, but I still kept vigilant for anyone else.

I mitigated the things I couldn't control as best I could by following the Titans with Glynda and Scathach.

The pair's job wasn't just to keep the Titans alive and weed out all the hidden support the Trigon agents might have. It had worked with the demon gate, but Glynda's only foes had been the Titans themselves.

That had been one of two significant things to go wrong with the plan.

The Sons of Trigon were definitely powerful. They all had potent magical abilities, and Envy's ability to shapeshift and use the powers of figures of envy was incredibly useful. On top of that, their ability to manipulate Sins was especially dangerous to those without my Defences.

In a strait up fight between them and the Titans, I gave even odds on who would be the victor.

But that was in a straight-up fight.

What they had pulled was something I had never expected of them.

The Sons of Trigon were men drunk on their power in the comics.

Young. Dumb. Full of cum.

What they pulled in that mall had been one of the most subtle and impressive shows of subterfuge I had ever seen. I honestly think even the Justice League would have failed had they been the ones in the Titan's place.

In less than ten minutes, they had defeated some of the most promising young superheroes in the world and completely ruined their reputation.

PR damage control revealing that the Titans were mastered would help, of course, but images of Beast Boy chewing on a dead man's arm would haunt the shapeshifter for the rest of his life.

It was a masterstroke of manipulation that took advantage of heroic psychology.

And it pissed me off.

Because there was absolutely no way the six idiots who had explained their ‘master plan’ to become ‘unstoppable’ could have come up with it.

If they were different from their comic counterparts, that was one thing. I had seen plenty of differences in this world from the various media I knew characters from.

But these numbskulls were fucking morons who taunted my wives and lorded their control of the Titans instead of capitalizing on it or trying to control Raven. They had summoned a demonic gate, possibly their trump card against the League and PRT, because they got mad.

They had openly stated their plan to drain my power despite having no goddamn clue how to go about it beyond ‘let’s gang up on him and go bonk!’

These guys were wastes of potential, and talking to them actively lowered my IQ.

And then there was the second thing that went FUBAR in this situation.

The ritual site itself.

Magic Talent was unbelievably useful when it came to learning. It didn’t give me knowledge out of nowhere, but it allowed me to learn at an incredible rate and keep that knowledge memorized.

Naturally, as I knew Trigon would be summoned, I had brushed up on rituals regarding him.

The library’s mansion had every book ever written in any of the original worlds of the ten women first summoned and mine.

Which included Raven’s homeworld and the ritual used to summon Trigon there.

So I recognized the part of the ritual intended to summon Demon Daddy, even if it was slightly different due to changes in dimensional structure.

It was the other part, the adaptions that had been made to the ritual, that was the fucked up part.

I only recognized it because I had been curious about a couple of books mentioned in passing.

A portion of the ritual circle carved with blood into the sand was designed to remove the soul and the power it contained and implant it in another body.

It was only luck that I recognized it as coming from Pythagoras’ Treaties on Animism.

That was one hell of a coincidence.

And I don’t believe in coincidences.

Somebody I didn’t know about was hidden in the shadows of this entire situation.

Someone skilled enough with magic to alter a ritual, smart enough lay a cunning ambush for the Titans, and malicious enough to work with demons.

And they had access to Pythagoras’ Treaties on Animism, whose only known copy was

last seen in the hands of the Sorcerer Supreme.

I really needed to see Steven Strange when this was all over.

I absolutely hated risks like this, but it was both too late to give up and too early to sacrifice my plan to deal with Trigon over what might be my paranoia.

Even if I was playing into someone else's plans.

So as I flew over the ocean to face Trigon, Raven's body thrown over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes, I kept my gaze vigilant.

If I did have to fight Trigon, it would be the perfect opportunity for a third party.

My eyes flitted the ocean's water below me before leaving it instantly to not give the game away.

If I had to fight Trigon, my plan would have already failed.

******

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said, poking Pride's cheeks playfully. She swatted my hand away with a glare. I poked again. She swatted again. My demon wife cannot be this cute. "But don't demon invasions end badly for everyone involved? Especially those who summon them. Especially, especially if they sacrifice a version of their younger selves to achieve it. Especially cubed, when we can stop it really, really easily."

"We will not be sacrificing my younger self," Raven replied, paying no attention to the escalating poking and dodging going on between me and her demon side. "I am doing this to help her. To give her something I always wanted but never achieved. A life free from his influence. I will need your help to help her survive the summoning."

"I don't really know what would be involved in whatever summons Trigon," I shrugged, and Pride stepped away at the opportunity, eyeing my hands warily. She was really tickling (ha) my sadistic tendencies. "So long as it isn't an instant death, I can keep her alive. But I still don't see why I can't just Free her from his influence. It would accomplish the same thing without the risk his summoning would bring. I really don't like this."

"Even if we Freed her now," Raven said with a shake of her head. "She would not believe it. She would still live in fear for the rest of her life. And she would be right to do so. Unless you maintain contact with something or someone, they can still be 'un-Freed'. And we will not be in this world forever. Trigon would find a way to influence her again."

I grimaced at the reminder.

My Elements gave me some handy abilities that exceeded the others'. It could be a power difference, the conjunction of two Elements, or more experience with them, but Tsunade and Diana could not do half the things I could.

But there was a hard limit.

I had to be touching the thing I wanted to influence. Whether it was my main body touching the ocean to make it 'trash free' or my avatar able to free Rhino, they both worked, but that was it.

If I wasn't touching someone or something, my abilities stopped working.

Something that did not limit the rest of the Family who had already gained their Element, though their abilities were not nearly as useful.

"I'm not sure how comfortable I am with taking on the closest equivalent to Satan this world has," I admitted. I wasn't being facetious, either. I had looked for people like Lucifer, The Endless, and other significant characters from Vertigo comics. Extensively. And found nothing. "Is this that important to you?"

"It is." Raven nodded, her placid look shifting to one of determination I rarely saw on her. "I would have given anything to be free of him. To live my life far from his shadow. If I can do the same for my younger self, I must try."

I idly messed with Pride's hair, much to her consternation. She glared at me, but I wasn't really paying attention.

This was a risk I didn't like.

Sure, I was Tier 10 and had unlimited power, but I was by no means the biggest fish in this ocean.

And Trigon was a Big Deal despite being thwarted by teenagers in various media.

You only became a multiversal-level conqueror in a comic book world with the power, intelligence, and cruelty to back that up.

I was going to talk with Artoria and Diana later about taking pointless risks, and doing something like this sounded too much like hypocrisy to me.

In the end, it came down to the simple question; would I support Raven, as I did the others?

"Heroes are really the worst," I sighed with a helpless smile.

And Raven was a hero.

She might not be a chivalrous one like Artoria or a classical one like Scathach. She certainly wasn't the prototypical example of a comic hero like Diana, but my demonic wife was just as much a hero at heart as all of them.

And I loved heroes.

Even if I'd never be one.

"If," I said, stressing the word. "If we are going to do this, we are going to need a plan. A good one. Right now, all I can think of is kidnapping your younger self on her birthday and summoning dear old dad to space where we are all lined up to blast him to smithereens."

"That would not work," Pride shook her head. "We have sensed his power on her. He is

monitoring her. Either directly or through agents. If she disappears or he thinks this is a trap, he will take countermeasures. Trigon is not stupid. If he was, he would have invaded and lost already. His plans span centuries."

"Your not making me feel good about killing my Father-in-Law, dear." I snarked, falling back on my habit of humour and sarcasm when I was uncomfortable. "He is not someone I would want to face without my actual body. But if I did it anywhere on earth, even in the oceans, it would result in enormous collateral damage. I can be free from physical restriction, or I can hurt him. Not both."

"You won't need to fight him at all," Pride smirked.

"I have been trying to devise a plan for weeks," Raven admitted. "Ever since we landed, and I investigated my counterpart. I knew she would be a problem. If I didn't discover one by the 29th, I would have asked you to just Free her."

"But now," Pride's smile was positively malevolent. "After Doomsday, I had an idea, my Monster. I need to know if it is possible and if you could build a plan to make it happen."

The way the demonic persona said it, it was clear it was she and not the primary consciousness that had come up with the plan.

Joy.

"Tell me," Pride purred. "How much power can you give us with a Command Seal?"

My eyebrows rose.

Well, now.

There was an idea.

******

"ELDEN LORD," Trigon sneered as I approached.

Trigon's voice reverberated through my body, loud enough that glass shattered in the city and the water churned.

"Discount Satan," I greeted with a nod and a polite smile.

"I AM HERE," he replied in a condescending tone. Every moment he was growing larger. "WHERE ARE YOU? WHERE IS YOUR CONFIDENCE NOW, PUNY DRAGON?"

I had thought he would have done something grandiose upon his summoning.

Maybe try to destroy the city, freeze time, turn the oceans into lava, or destroy the planet. Most of my contingencies and all my wives were set up to minimize casualties as best they could.

If he had thrown his power around to create some dramatic battlefield, he would have been in for some very unpleasant surprises.

That's what happens when you give Medea, one of the greatest witches to ever live with a Territory Creation skill of A, time to set up in the Domain of a Goddess of Order.

Even ignoring the shadowy hand behind the curtain, I had backup plans for my backup plans.

Trigon, perhaps accidentally, sidestepped almost all of them.

"You know," I said casually. "I thought you'd be bigger. I mean, sure, you're taller than a few buildings, but you won't even get caught between my teeth. I'll give you a few minutes. It's only fair."

Trigon laughed.

'What are you doing!?' Raven asked, her magic spelling out the words in a tiny font right in front of my eye in the hope of going unnoticed. 'Why aren't you killing him?'

"It's pre-fight banter," I said in mock seriousness, making no effort to be quiet. "It is very important. How else are we supposed to see who has the bigger dick? I am winning, by the way."

'What happened to killing him before he could grow too strong? Move that lazy lizard ass and kill him before it's too late!'

"It's already too late," I shrugged, bouncing Raven's body as I did so.

'What?'

"LISTEN TO HIM. THE LAZY LIZARD KNOWS HE HAS LOST. HE LOST AS SOON AS I ARRIVED. *I. AM. INVINCIBLE*."

What Trigon had done had been brilliant in its simplicity.

He knew I was waiting for him on this end. He knew I was strong, and he'd be at his most vulnerable when he arrived. Unless he had a few days, he simply would not be able to match me while separated from the seat of his power.

So he made sure he had a few days.

All his power, all that had crossed from his dimension, was bent to one purpose.

Defence.

Right now, Trigon's body could be thrown into the sun, and he would not even get a little singed.

If I wanted to kill him, I would need to throw enough power around to destroy the solar system. That would obviously destroy the earth and everyone on it.

That, and I plain could not do it. Though I had infinite power, my output had always been a stopgap.

Tier 10 scaled infinitely upwards, and Trigon was just plain higher on the food chain than me. This was not Dragon Ball. I couldn't gain the power to destroy galaxies on a whim.

A big fish in an ocean full of sharks and leviathans.

That's all I was.

At the same time, he had no power to spare for grand displays nor the ability to destroy me.

That is why he was fine talking things out right now.

We were in a stalemate.

One that benefited him more and more every second that passed.

He had outsmarted my outsmarting.

Turns out the devil isn't easy to kill.

Who knew?

"You remember that castle analogy I used? When you lowered the drawbridge and opened the gate, he came alone with no weapons, but he was in a mech suit without power. We can't hurt him, and he's charging up his beam canon."

'What?'

"HE MEANS I HAVE WON, DAUGHTER. ALL HIS PLANS HAVE FAILED. NOW, HE CAN ONLY FLEE."

"To go back to my lecture on the five S's of combat," I said, hovering in front of the red giant who looked at us in amusement, confident in his victory. "Even with all my strength, speed, or skill, Trigon has controlled the situation, so I have already lost if we were to fight."

'So that's it? You're giving up without even a fight? What happened to all that bravado? To going out with a bang?'

"Hey," I said defensively. "I told you, didn't I. Fighting to the death is for those who can't run away. And I am very good at running away."

"THEN FLEE, LITTLE LIZARD. LEAVE MY DAUGHTER AND FLEE LIKE THE FLEA YOU ARE. WE WILL FIND YOU. MY DAUGHTER WILL LEARN HER PLACE AS MY RIGHT HAND, AND THEN WE SHALL HUNT YOU AND YOUR FAMILY DOWN LIKE THE DOGS. IT SHALL BE FINE SPORT."

'I'll never join you!' Raven spelled in massive black letters across the afternoon sky.

I smiled.

It was good to see she had some spunk.

I hated damsels in distress.

"You know," I said with a laugh. "Your family is so dysfunctional you should have your own sit-coms. 'Devil's in the Details'? 'Meet the Trigons'? 'Full Hell'? We can workshop the name later. I have to ask. How do you feel about all your kids wanting to kill you and absorb your power?"

“PRIDE,” Trigon said with a smirk, arms crossed and four eyes looking at me in amusement.

I must look like a bug to him.

I laughed.

“THEY WOULD HAVE FAILED, BUT MY BROOD SHOULD HAVE SUCH GRAND AMBITIONS. MY DAUGHTER WILL LEARN AS WELL.”

‘Never!’

“Pst,” I mock whispered with a giggle. “I don’t think she likes you very much.”

“What is going on here?” A voice interrupted our little conversation.

All three of us turned to the new arrival.

Eidolon.

He was floating in the sky above us, obviously trying to understand the situation.

Usually, when you see someone like Trigon, you blast first and ask questions later, but I imagine me standing here talking to him threw him off.

You obviously don’t want to start a fight that can destroy a nearby city without getting the details if you can help it.

“Nothing much,” I said casually. More heroes were showing up now. Superman. Green Lantern. Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman. Artoria atop Dun Stalion. “Just the end of the world. Standard Tuesday.”

“Sir Mikael?” Artoria asked, gripping Rhongomyniad tightly.

“Nothing to do, really,” I mock sighed. “The winner is already decided. Have you guys been introduced? Everyone, this is Trigon the Terrible. Lord of Madness. The Ravager. Conqueror of multiple dimensions. Raven’s dad. Swell guy, really. Trigon, this is a good portion of the League of Justice. Oh, look. More heroes.”

Artoria and my Diana relaxed.

Everyone else tensed up.

“FLIES, THE LOT OF THEM.” Trigon did not even look at them, staring all four eyes at Raven and me.

“What have you done?” Green Lantern hissed, ring glowing with power as he alternated a glare between the demon lord and me.

“Me?” I asked in my best innocent voice. They didn’t look convinced. “Why is it that every time a multi-dimensional Demon Lord shows up, it is the dragon’s fault? This is racial profiling, and I will not stand for it!”

“Why should we believe you?” Eidolon asked, starting to glow as well.

Supergirl. Myrddin. Martian Manhunter. Iron Man.

“Because I’m pretty?” I asked, running a hand through my hair and giving everyone a

roguish smirk.

Again, they didn't seem impressed.

Weird.

'It is not his fault', Raven wrote in massive letters in the sky. 'It's mine. He was just trying to help me. He's the only reason I'm still alive.'

"Raven?" Superman asked hesitantly, looking at the dark letters.

'Yes.'

Was that Aegis? It was hard to identify Worm characters on sight because they were from a book rather than a comic. A few more heroes appeared that I didn't recognize.

"She's in pretty rough shape," I nodded as I casually held up Raven's body for them to see.

"By the Gods!" Wonder Woman gasped, staring at the bloody gaping hole in the young woman's ribcage.

"'Tis but a flesh wound," I put Raven back on my shoulder. "She'll sleep it off. Now, I feel you all have been terribly rude to our guest." I turned back to Trigon, who had watched everything without batting an eye. He was taller than the Empire State Building by now. "Sorry about them. They really aren't good with visitors. You should have seen them when I first showed up."

"YOU AMUSE ME, ELDEN LORD," Trigon laughed. "YOU ARE STRONG. CUNNING. DO NOT WASTE YOURSELF UPON THIS MISERABLE PILE OF DIRT. JOIN ME. BECOME A GENERAL IN MY LEGION. AID ME IN MY CONQUEST. I SHALL SPARE YOUR LIFE AND THOSE OF YOUR FAMILY."

"What kind of dental are you offering?"

"Elden Lord!" Superman said sharply. Even the blue boy scout was fed up with my bullshit.

"Fine," I sighed with a pout. "Why is it that only the devil thinks I'm funny?"

"Because you should go to hell for your jokes?" Diana asked guilelessly. Unlike her counterpart, she was completely relaxed.

My wives, even those I argued with, knew me so well.

It almost made me feel bad for doing this to prove a point to them.

Lack of communication was a bitch, wasn't it?

"Before we get to the blasting and the killing," I said, looking around at the dozen heroes gathered. "I have three questions for all of you. I gave a lecture earlier on what I consider the five S's of combat. By evaluating them, you can determine the winner of any fight. I named four of them. Strength. Speed. Skill. Situation. What is the fifth S?"

There was a beat of silence as I got odd looks from the heroes and even Trigon. Many

of them were already amped for a fight, but they were waiting for the signal from one of their leaders.

"Sarcasm?" Iron Man said sarcastically.

"No, but that does sound like something I'd say," I answered with a smile.

"Stealth?" Supergirl asked hesitantly.

"Good job," I said, conjuring the illusion of a golden star on her forehead. "The exact word I was thinking of was 'surprise', but I'll accept it. Have a star." She beamed at me. "The next question is a riddle. Only one colour, but not one size. Stuck at the bottom, yet I easily fly. Present in sun, but not in rain. Doing no harm and feeling no pain. What am I?"

""Shadow.""

Multiple voices answered all at once.

"Perfect," I smiled, conjuring golden stars in front of everyone that had answered. Iron Man. Green Lantern. Myrrdin. Martian Manhunter. Superman. Diana. Wonder Woman. "Fun fact though, the riddle is slightly misleading. Only one hundred percent pure water does not cast a shadow. All impure water, such as the ocean below us, casts shadows."

I saw Artoria's and Diana's eyes widen in realization.

"Enough of this farce," Eidolon snorted, conjuring a plasma sword.

I tensed.

Trigon wasn't the only one that benefited from more time.

"Wait!" Superman called, holding out a hand to stop him. I saw him watching me, evaluating me.

Then he decided to trust me.

"One more question won't hurt," the Kryptonian said, looking at his fellow heroes. "The longer we delay, the more time for evacuation."

"ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD WILL NOT SAVE YOU FROM ME, FLIES."

"Then you have nothing to fear from one question," Wonder Woman asked, following her friend's lead and extending the hand of trust. She still looked ready for a fight, though.

"IT MATTERS NOT WHAT AMUSEMENT THE DEFEATED BRING. THE VICTOR HAS BEEN DECIDED." Trigon paraphrased my earlier words, unconcerned that he was surrounded by the world's greatest heroes. "I WANT TO SEE THIS 'SURPRISE'."

"Great," I said with a smile and a clap of my hands. I could tell most of the heroes were put off by my chipper attitude. Too bad for them. So long as I was having fun, that is all that really mattered. "This last question is a simple but difficult one. What six words am I thinking of?"

"This is nonsense," Eidolon cursed but did not move.

“That was three words,” I wagged my finger at the green hero. “Though I do agree that it fits the situation pretty well.”

“That isn’t fair,” Supergirl said, pouting at me. “It could be anything.”

“I got the idea from the Hobbit,” I shrugged. “Blame Tolkien. I know I do. But fine, here’s a hint. The first word is one of the seven deadly sins.”

“Pride comes before the fall,” Tony Stark said, his voice noticeably hopeful as one of the world’s greatest minds put together the clues.

“You are so close, but that is only five words,” I sighed. “Any other guesses?”

I felt a hand tap my shoulder as a few heroes threw out their guesses, each worse than the last.

“That’s not it either,” I sighed. “You guys are getting further from the answer.”

“Just tell us and finish this farce,” Eidolon snapped.

“Fiiiiiineeee,” I pouted, turning to look at Trigon and shrugging my shoulders in a ‘what can you do’ sort of gesture. “Iron Man actually got the closest, one out of six, so you get a quarter of a star. The answer is this:”

My chest glowed red as I channelled six command seals.

It was hidden in the shadow of my shirt.

Nobody even noticed, too surprised by Raven’s body dissolving into nothing.

“Pride!”

The first seal disappeared.

“Absorb!”

The second seal dissolved. Black spread across the ocean floor.

“Consume!”

The third seal vanished. A dark light shone from below Trigon’s left breast.

“Supplant!”

Fourth seal. Trigon staggered.

“Overthrow!”

The fifth vanished as the sunlight seemed to dim in the sky, though there was no cloud to block it.

“Usurp!”

Darkness overtook the earth as Shadow consumed the sea and sky.

A mad, throaty laugh resounded through the air as a Demon Lord fell to the coup.

The dark bubbled up from the ocean depths, almost tar-like, as it slowly, methodically climbed Trigon’s legs.

The Demon Lord did not struggle against the Shadow in the water.

He was too busy clawing at his chest frantically, desperately, as he doubled over,

roaring in pain.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" He roared, red flesh distending as part of his body collapsed. Pustules and boils formed and burst in explosions of puss and darkness. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, YOU PATHETIC LIZARD?"

"Me?" I asked innocently. One of Trigon's horns was sucked into his skull with a disgusting red 'splorch'. "I didn't do anything. Maybe it was something you ate. Heartburn is a real threat when you get your age."

His right arm fell into the Shadow as his shoulder dissolved in an explosion of darkness and blood.

The fallen arm was consumed by the tar in a moment.

"By the gods!" Wonder Woman gasped.

Trigon did not shrink.

"ELDEN LORD!"

He sank.

"ELDEN LORD!"

Two red eyes, glaring hatred at me, exploded as shadowy tendrils erupted from Trigon's face.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Supergirl said, hand covering her mouth.

His red-scaled skin was filled with countless holes, and his white and red muscles were visibly absorbed by the shadows that intertwined throughout his body.

"ELDEN LORD!"

"Moshi, Moshi," I said, flying closer to the collapsing body of the Demon King. "Elden Lord's heart burgers. You kill 'em, we grill 'em. Any complaint with your order?"

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

"I told you," I sighed, disappointedly shaking my head. "This isn't me. This is all you. You really should be more careful of what you use to make your portal invade a new world. You never know where it's been."

"What is going on?" Eidolon asked.

I ignored him.

"I do appreciate a bit of irony, though," I continued. Part of any good showdown is the gloating. The rush of victory after a hard-fought battle. Even if this entire fight had been one of the minds rather than might. "When I said all your children wanted to absorb your power, I wasn't exaggerating. They all wanted to do it. It's almost impressive that they all came up with the same idea. But then you said you felt pride at the thought. Well, let me introduce you to Pride."

From the shadows escaping Trigon's eyes, a body formed beside me.

A taller, more mature Raven with four red eyes.

Her cloak, rather than blue, was half covered in red. The colour spread with every second that passed, mirroring the parts of Trigon dissolving into shadow.

“Greetings, Father,” Pride curtsied, her mouth curved in a malicious smirk. Her voice, layered and distorted, was still laughing in the air. “I see you have met My Monster.”

Trigon stared, his two remaining eyes wide with surprise.

“To continue the introductions, have you met my wife?” I continued as my Raven formed from my shadow, her younger self held in a bridal carry in her arms and uninjured. Now that I was no longer in contact with the young woman, she was no longer Free from her body and was just unconscious. But she had seen what she needed to. Her father had lost. No one was invincible. “I think you are familiar with each other.”

Like her demonic aspect, Raven’s cloak slowly changed colour in a mirror of Trigon’s consumption.

Instead of red or blue, Raven’s cloak turned a pure, pristine, uncorrupted white.

She said nothing, watching this universe’s version of the man who terrorized her every nightmare be absorbed by her Shadow.

“You know,” Pride said, idly toying with her fingernails. She was also partaking in the time-honoured tradition of kicking people when they were down. I am so proud. (Ha) “It could have been over quickly. All you had to do was use your powers more. Focus less on defence and more on offence. You might have even noticed me in time if you did. Been able to run back. But you didn’t. And so sure of your victory. Now, I get the pleasure of eating you slowly.”

Trigon stared.

Then he *laughed*.

“HAHAHAHAHAHA!”

I tensed, ready for the next layer of the fight.

This had never been a brawl about power but a contest in preparation and planning.

The winner was the one who could control the ‘situation’ and held the greatest ‘surprise’.

By controlling the one aspect Trigon could never change, the need for Raven to be the portal, I had outsmarted his outsmarting my outsmarting.

I knew more than Trigon, so I had the upper hand, but there was one aspect I did not know about.

The hand behind the curtain still hadn’t shown itself, and I had never truly dropped my guard.

But nothing happened.

Trigon continued to laugh as he dissolved.

He laughed as his knees collapsed in on themselves, forcing him to support himself in the black water with his one good arm.

He laughed as his chest exploded, a pulsating mass of shadows pumping within his breast.

He laughed until only half a face remained unconsumed by Shadow.

“THAT’S MY GIRL!”

And then Trigon the Terrible was no more.

“I am not yours anymore,” Raven said plainly, face wholly blank and cloak entirely spotless.

Then, in a move I would not have expected in a million years, she shifted her younger self to one arm and wrapped the other around my waist.

“I am his.”

I beamed.

“Ah,” I said, wrapping my arm around her and nuzzling her cheek. Her cheeks pinked very slightly. “I love you too.”

“Hey!” Pride shouted, her chest puffing forward with pride. God, was she cute. “I did all the work!”

“You’re the same person,” I rolled my eyes. “But, I will reward you too. Happy birthday, by the way. I hope you like my present. Only the best husbands can give their wives demon lords on a silver platter. Should I start calling you a Demon Queen now?”

“Yes!”

“No,” Raven said plainly, ignoring her demonic aspect. “Let his conquests sort themselves out. I do not plan on ruling anything, so they are free to do as they wish. Trigon is dead, and I have most of his power. This is done.”

“Ahem!” A polite cough from Superman interrupted my little triumph. Most of the heroes were flying around awkwardly, looking uncomfortable at our public display of affection. “Now that this situation is handled, can you explain what happened? Is Raven, that is, our Raven, all right? And what is with the gate to hell in the park? I feel that should be a concern.”

“Nah,” I waved him off with my free arm. “That’s just Scathach having fun. Feel free to ignore it. Once she get’s bored, I’ll have Medea close it. Raven’s fine, as are the rest of the Teen Titans. As for an explanation? It will be a while. Let’s get something to eat. Who wants tacos? I’ve been craving them for days.”

“I do,” Artoria raised a hand eagerly.

“I could go for some fish tacos,” Yoruichi said, startling all the heroes with her

appearance.

What did they expect?

There was no way I would risk fighting a Demon Lord without my Family.

Yoruichi is just the one that decided to join us. The others were around here somewhere.

Just like they always would be.

Author's Note:

Thus ends Furlough, part 2 of Volume 2. With this chapter, we cross the 300k word mark, and I only consider this the halfway point.

Jesus Christ.

Anyway. I know some people will be disappointed there wasn't a huge throwdown between Trigon and Mikael's real body, but it was never him that was the main reason behind this entire arc.

It was Raven.

I won't say much else, just a few words of thanks to QQ user Xagnam who made an AI rendition of Ranni's lines in the Epilogue of Volume 1. It's really cool to hear them in her voice, and it fits pretty well with Ranni's doll aesthetic, despite a few pacing issues. You can find it in the sound cloud by pasting this link and adding periods.

soundcloud period com / xagnam / ranni-the-witch-from-rapturous-rhapsody/s-Ir8RBnOVr7f?si=30cbe0c15f7c43d7ae1c6357f7b20ef4&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=so

Also, in honour of Valentine's this month, the releases for the rest of the month will be more lemon content, with the occasional SS or omake thrown in. We'll get to part 3 in March.

I'll see you all next week.

SIDE STORY VII:
REST FOR THE WEARY

Shadow and shape mix together at dawn
But by the time you catch them, simplicity's gone
So we sort through the pieces, my friends and I
Searching through the darkness to find the breaks in the sky
And the reason that she loved him was the reason I loved him too
And he never wondered what was right or wrong
He just knew, he just knew

Raven awoke with a start to the sun setting over San Fransico Bay, the light glinting off Titan Tower.

From the strange disembodied perspective the Elden Lord had held her in, her last sight had been a vision of herself. A more mature, red-cloaked and four-eyed version of herself, standing over her father and taunting him as he died.

One moment she watched Trigon, her father and source of all her nightmares, collapse inward in a shower of blood, fire, and shadow.

The next, she sat bolt upright from where she lay on a bench, the sensations of having a body again, plus the light from the setting sun, almost blinded her.

Raven blinked back stars as her vision swam.

"Easy there," a calm voice murmured in her ear. It was soothing and familiar.

For a brief instant, Raven thought of her youth. Thought of those early years in Azarath before she had heard of Trigon.

Before she knew what she was.

"What happened?" Raven asked, not willing to allow herself to follow that thought. Blinking away the light and turning to the woman. It was all a blur of colours, predominantly white with a splash of red. "Who are you?"

"Trigon's dead," the woman said, her voice almost entirely monotone but for the barest hint of emotion. Raven froze, her sight recovering. "Mikael confirmed it. There will be no resurrections, comebacks, or summonings. You are free."

"Mom?"

Raven would deny the crack in her voice till the day she died, deny that her eyes welled up and a hope, long thought lost, budded in her breast.

The woman shook her head gently, sending Raven's hope to die.

Now that she was paying attention, however, Raven could make out the little

differences between the woman in front of her and her memories of her mother.

For one, she was more full-figured than Arella had been and possibly taller. It was hard to tell since they were both sitting down. Apart from that, the white cloak the woman wore was not a robe of the Azaranthian order, but one similar to Raven's own, and its hood was embroidered with a red crown-like circlet in the cloth.

Apart from those little details, the woman was almost an exact copy of Angela Roth had been.

Or how Raven would be in a few years.

"I am not our mother," the older Raven said gently. "No matter how I wish she had lived to see this day."

"Then you are…" Raven asked hesitantly. "Like the other Wonder Woman?"

"You can call her Diana, and I, Rachel," Rachel said, the barest uptick of her lips indicating a smile. "I do still prefer Raven, but it will keep things from being too complicated when the two of us are together. But yes, I am you. A version of yourself from a different universe."

Raven sat for a moment, reeling at the idea or implications, then her last sight before falling unconsciousness came back to mind.

"You killed Trigon?" Raven half asked, half demanded.

"I did," Rachel said.

"How?"

"I absorbed so much of his power he simply could not keep himself invulnerable any longer. From there, it was relatively simple," Rachel said in her monotone as if explaining how she had changed the ink of a copy machine.

"It couldn't be that simple!" Raven denied it in disbelief.

It couldn't be that easy.

Trigon the Terrible would not die so quickly.

Not the figure who had destroyed worlds and haunted her every waking nightmare.

"The setup was a bit more complicated," Rachel nodded. "Mikael made the plan, so if you want exact details, you'll need to ask him. But in the end, that is basically what happened. As soon as I had absorbed enough, consumed enough of what made him so powerful, he was no different than any other strong demon."

"How did you absorb his power?"

"A gift from my husband," the older woman said, the first clear sign of emotion on her face as she smiled. It wasn't a wide one, but it was real.

She raised her hand, and whisps of darkness fell from it. A wave of shadows fell to the pier and spread slowly. A cigarette butt someone had thrown away sank into the murky

waves. Raven watched it with wide, almost terrified eyes.

“One of many,” Rachel continued, dismissing the shadow with another hand wave. “If Trigon had noticed, he might have been able to flee with most of his power. But he didn’t, and now we are free. Everything he once was, I now hold.”

“He’s gone? For good?” Raven asked, reality almost swimming in her mind from the thought. Was she dreaming?

“For good.” Rachel nodded, a hand idly touching the red crown embroidered on her hood. “Mikael was right. You didn’t believe he could do it. You still don’t. Even when he separated your consciousness and forced you to watch, you still don’t believe he’s gone. But this is real. You are not dreaming or dead. Trigon is dead. You are free.”

Raven didn’t answer for a long moment. Then she did what she usually did when confronted. She deflected.

“So you are the new Trigon?” Raven asked, half hopeful and half fearful as an idea came to mind. Would she have to stop being a hero? She still knew some magic, but most of her powers came from her fa- from Trigon. “Can you… can you make me human? Remove his influence, his blood?”

“You are already free from his influence,” the older cambion said. “My husband purged it when he switched your body with my shadow construct. But you never had his blood. It was always yours. Ours. Never his.”

“But-”

“Take it from someone who has walked that path,” Rachel cut off her younger self. “We may deny it as much as possible, but we must stop being afraid. Our demonic side is us as much as our love, our compassion. Like humans, we hold both. The sooner you accept it, the sooner you can truly live. Only then can we truly gain control of our powers.”

“Is that what you did?” Raven asked, her words almost bitter in their sarcasm.

“Yes and no,” Rachel nodded, unconcerned with her disgruntled younger self. “I have my own method. One that lets me be whole. The same process will not work for you. We are different people with different experiences and goals.”

“If we are so different, why are you helping me?”

“Because I wish someone would have helped me,” Rachel responded simply. “My team tried, but our situations are so unique that I never had a mentor or guide. I would have given almost anything to be free of my Trigon, to have someone who knew what I was going through and could provide some advice. I was blindly flailing around, and I hope you can avoid some of my mistakes.”

“You were a Titan too?” Raven couldn’t help but ask, curious about her older self’s

experience.

It also shifted the topic away from one of her deepest, darkest wishes. The thoughts that kept her up at night, bitter laments over ‘whys’ and ‘what ifs’.

“I was,” Rachel nodded, smiling slightly in fond remembrance. “My team was somewhat different, and it changed over the years, but the Teen Titans will always hold a place in my heart. The family I found when I had nowhere else to go.”

“What happened?” Raven asked, detecting the tone of the woman’s voice even if she couldn’t feel her emotions.

“I lost them,” Rachel admitted. “Too early. Before I gained control. Before I allowed myself to *feel*. I always held myself back, too afraid of what I could do if I lost control. Of Trigon and his plans. I hope you can avoid that. Laugh. Love. Cry. Build precious memories without fear of ‘what could be’.”

Raven didn’t know what to say to that. How do you comfort an alternate version of yourself from the future?

“Your team will need you,” Rachel continued. “Now especially, but in the future as well.”

“Are they alright?” Raven asked, almost fearful of the answer.

“They are whole and safe,” Rachel nodded. “Glynda is looking after them, but you should talk to them. Explain things. Our brothers were not kind to them, but if they are like my friends were, the Titans will recover. They are strong.”

“This is all my fault,” Raven grumbled. “I should have told them. Explained the plan. Now a bunch of people are dead, and they were mind controlled.”

“If you had, many more people would have died,” Rachel denied plainly. “We didn’t know who was out there or what they planned. Trigon had been watching you and would have set up countermeasures against anything you did. By walking into a trap, we could minimize casualties and end Trigon’s threat once and for all. If you wish to blame anyone, blame our father and brothers. Their actions are theirs alone.”

Raven wanted to argue, to explain that if she hadn’t been there, then none of this would have happened.

Rachel simply raised a brow, an almost imperceptible smirk on her lips.

Raven’s words died in her throat.

Of course a version of herself would know precisely what she would say.

Better to change the subject.

“The Elden Lord?” Raven asked in her normal caustic voice. “Really?”

“Hm,” Rachel hummed, obviously deliberating what to say as she looked out over the ocean. “Don’t let his terrible sense of humour fool you. Though he may pretend otherwise,

he is more mature than anyone I have ever dated. If your tastes are anything like mine, that is one of the most important things we look for in men."

"Mature? Him?" Raven sputtered in denial. "The guy who kept saying 'poke' to get me to eat? Who can't finish a sentence without making a pun? Are we talking about the same man? No way. Not happening. He's like an older, more cocky Beast Boy."

Rachel's mouth quirked the tinies bit again, and it took Raven a moment to realize what was so funny to her other self.

"That's not possible," Raven denied. "There is no world where I would ever date Garfield. I mean, he's, he's… he's Beast Boy." She said as if that explained anything.

"And yet, before I started my relationship with Mikael, my time with Garfield was some of the happiest I had ever been," Rachel said plainly.

"I don't believe you."

"I am not saying you should date him, or anyone for that matter. I have no idea if he is the same as my Garfield or if your tastes are the same as mine. Just… do not discount him, nor Mikael. Star noticed right away. Those who laugh loudest often cry quietly. Someone doesn't have to be quiet to be mature. I won't say anything about Garfield, that is his story to share if he wishes, but I will say Mikael is like us. The primary thing he searches for in a relationship partner is emotional maturity."

"Then why is he so," Raven searched for the right word.

"Childish? Annoying? We have all called him much worse before, do not mind it. He knows what he is doing." Rachel paused, eyes distant. "When things get bad, and I mean really terrible, people handle it differently. You and I, we retreat inward. Others get mad. Mikeal laughs. He chooses to laugh. And then, when things get better, he continues to laugh because why wouldn't he? There are much worse habits than jokes."

"I guess," Raven agreed reluctantly. "I just don't see what you see in him."

"That wasn't what originally got me to fall in love with him," Rachel admitted. "It was his control of himself and his emotions. He channels them, even the worst of his whims, into his goals. I only know of one time he ever lost control in the entire time I've known him. It was in completely understandable circumstances, and even then, it was only for a short time. Then he refocused. I admired that control and envied it."

"That's it?"

"And when we were… dating, I guess you could call it that, it was the little things that built up. How he always made sure to show us the best the world had to offer. He would listen to our problems, even though he had enough on his plate. And his curiosity. Mikael is always learning. More than anyone I have ever met, Mikael is always seeking to improve his knowledge."

Raven listened to her older self almost ramble as she talked about her husband. The look on her face, placid to most observers, was an open book to the Titan.

Amusement.

Sympathy.

Remembrance.

Love.

For just a moment, Raven felt jealous.

Jealous that this woman, this 'what if' version of herself, had found someone she clearly loved and who loved her back. Her relationship was unconventional, to say the least, but she was clearly happy.

"Perhaps another way to look at it then," Rachel said, standing up and looking down at the still-sitting Raven. "My husband successfully schemed against one of the greatest demon lords ever. He orchestrated events that minimalized casualties, less than fifty injured or dead, against a being who conquered multiple realities. I can only think of two, maybe three beings on this planet who would be smart enough to pull that off and not one of them would have done so at their wife's request."

"When you put it like that," Raven muttered, standing as well. She was already fully recovered from the vertigo she felt when she first awoke.

"Maturity is not age," Rachel said patiently. "It is not being serious or not being childish. Maturity is knowing oneself and your place in the world. It is accepting the consequences of your actions. Then deciding to act in a way that allows you to be who you want to be. Maturity is not something some people simply are. It is a choice."

"And he chooses to be a man-child," Raven sighed. "It just seems like such a waste, is all."

"But it is his choice," Rachel nodded before redirecting the topic back to what she had stayed around to say. "Just as you now face yours. It is not my place to say what you should do or who you should become. I merely wished to give you options and opportunities I lacked."

"Thank you," Raven said softly, meeting the older woman's eyes. "I never said it to him, but I will say it to you. Thank you. For everything."

"Your welcome," Rachel replied just as softly. Then she nodded towards the Titan Tower. "You should get back. Mikael is done explaining things to the others, though they will have questions for you. Your team is also worried about you."

"Will I see you again?" The young woman asked, hiding her nervousness well.

"I'll be around," Rachel nodded lightly. "I'll visit. If you have questions or need to talk, you can tell Glynda. She'll let me know. She has become quite fond of you all and

will be sticking around. Though I think Scathach will probably move on once the week is over."

"What are you going to do now? You're the new Demon Lord."

Raven didn't know how to feel about that. Anything was better than Trigon, but she was sure there would be problems in the future. Nightwing would be insufferable with his questions, she knew. He was very much his teacher's student like that.

"I am more powerful, but I am still me," Rachel said in a repeat of her husband's words. "Power is just power. It is up to us to decide its purpose. I will use it for my family. To never lose it again. What you do with yours will be your choice. I am returning to where I belong, just as you should. We both have families waiting for us. Take care, and let me know if you need anything."

Raven almost spoke, made some sarcastic comment or asked another question.

But the young cambion closed her mouth and looked away, the tiniest flush in her cheeks.

It felt… nice, to have a woman she could count on. To look up to.

She would never say it, but she was always a bit envious of her teammates' bonds with their mentors.

Rachel gave her younger self one last encouraging smile before disappearing.

Raven watched her older self vanish into her white shadow.

It felt odd knowing she had someone looking out for her now. And, out of every Titan, her backing was definitely the coolest.

None of the others could say they had a demon lord looking out for them.

With a sardonic smirk at the ironic twist of fate, Raven turned to fly home, that most insidious of demons still beating in her breast.

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Batman watched the footage for the seventeenth time.

He frowned.

He was missing something, some clue that fit everything together. Some niggling little detail that put the picture together.

So far, everything was lining up as the Elden Lord, and later Raven, explained.

According to the draconic alien, he sensed Trigon's influence on Raven and started a plan to minimize casualties and stop Trigon's invasion.

If you bought his arguments, Mikael had done it to help the earth and save a younger version of his wife.

Batman was not surprised that the hitherto unseen ‘Raven’ was a version of the Teen Titan. He had deduced as much as soon as the dragon had stated his interest in the Protectorate team.

He hadn’t told anyone that fact. Both to observe the dragon’s movement and determine his aim.

Batman squashed his slight guilt at the thought of his lies by omission with the iron will he cultivated throughout his life.

Guilt and regrets would not save the world.

Dick would recover, as would his team. Batman had kept an eye on them since the failed invasion, even more than before. Partly out of concern and partly to make sure the Elden Lord didn’t have any further plans.

He also used his considerable money and influence to ensure that the Titan’s image was not ruined. He wasn’t the only one, as the PRT had a vested interest in making sure one of their most beloved teams was not seen as a group of monsters.

So far, the narrative had been successfully shaped to the Titans being victims of a group of Masters while performing search and rescue. Public sympathy was on their side, despite a vocal minority.

People always wanted to tear heroes down or kick people when they were down.

Thinking about the last week, there was one silver lining to this debacle.

Everyone now knew how manipulative the Elden Lord could be.

Most were convinced he was still on the side of good and saw him as a more powerful and friendly Batman.

Batman’s frown deepened into a scowl.

Using all he gained through observation, testimony, and evidence, the caped crusader had already compiled a primary psychological profile of the dragon.

It wasn’t pretty.

And then there were his ‘wives’.

Diana and Artoria, over the last week they had been working with the League, had proven themselves to not only be incredibly powerful and resourceful but to be fiercely loyal to their ‘family’.

The pair had solved several issues on their own, from basic robberies in a city to helping negotiate a peaceful settlement between two warring nations. They then stopped a cabal of rogue magi hoping to inflict a curse upon London. The pair flitted from one heroic effort to another, rarely resting or taking a break.

It was an energy usually seen in heroes just starting out, which they definitely weren’t, or coming back from a long injury or retirement attempt.

The two were never really alone, always accompanied by another League member, usually Wonder Woman, but that hardly slowed them down.

Batman's scowl deepened.

Despite hopes to use them as a point of weakness for the insular 'Family', either as turning points or sources of information, he had learned little of use.

The pair were friendly enough and happy to talk about their lives before meeting Mikael. Batman already had an extensive dossier on potential threats this new version of Wonder Woman had pointed out, though he was careful to take it with a grain of salt since he had noticed discrepancies.

Any time the subject turned to the Elden Lord, they either replied with vagaries, shifted the topic, or outright said they wouldn't spill his secrets. It was the same when they talked about the rest of the 'wives'. Little amusing anecdotes were the best the League had gotten on them, but nothing about abilities, goals, or origins.

The only commonality Batman had found was that all the women were from destroyed worlds, and the Elden Lord had saved them. All but Ranni and Melina.

And then there was this most recent disaster.

Looking at the things on the surface, the Elden Lord had saved the world from the interdimensional invasion by one of the most infamous world conquerors.

Looking even a bit deeper, you could see the truth.

The Elden Lord now had the power of that same interdimensional conqueror through one of his loyal followers and gained an enormous boost in positive PR.

And the superhero community took another black eye by failing to be the ones to stop the threat.

Again.

To call it an unmitigated disaster was an understatement.

Batman was about to rewatch the clip for the twenty-second time when a communication came through.

After making sure proper defences were in place, and the signal was encrypted so it couldn't be tracked to the Batcave, he accepted the call.

Stephen Strange's face appeared on his screen, looking worn and haggard.

"What happened?" Batman asked by way of greeting.

As a member of the League, he did not have any jurisdictional authority over the Sorcerer Supreme. Nor was the magic user the type of man who would follow his orders out of admiration or respect like some of the junior heroes did.

But, as a fellow member of the Illuminati, a small group dedicated to preserving life on Earth, a certain amount of communication was expected since he was the one who

relayed messages more often than not.

"I've caught the thief," Strange said with an exhausted sigh. "Some hedge mage specializing in teleportation. Would have got him days ago if he wasn't being protected by members of the Hand."

"Any connection to the Elden Lord?" Batman asked.

"Not as far as I could tell," the sorcerer denied. "An opportunist that managed to discover that my wards were destroyed. He teleported in while Wang was out, and I was dealing with an out-world threat. I recovered most of the stolen items, but I am still missing a few books and artifacts. By the time I caught up, he had sold them, and the leads have dead-ended."

"Anything to be aware of?"

"Nothing especially dangerous or significantly powerful. He could only grab whatever was out in the open and not behind the internal protections. A few books on rituals, astromancy, one of the scrolls the Elden Lord gave me, a handful of protection charms against scrying, and a pair of conjoined doorways that allow for minor dimensional travel on the same plane of reality. The most I see it used for is some smuggling operations and some basic dark magic."

Ironically, the mention of the Elden Lord's scrolls allayed Batman's fear that this was another one of his schemes. There would be no point in giving the Sorcerer Supreme a tome only to steal it again. It was always possible the dragon had tipped this opportunist off about the Sanctum's weakness, but there was so little gained that it was not worth the risk.

On top of that, it just wasn't the dragon's style.

The Elden Lord was an egoist.

If he wanted to rob Strange, he would do it himself.

With his power and immunity to all forms of magical observation, there was little Strange could do to stop the Elden Lord without a direct confrontation.

"Sent me a detailed list. I'll let the others know what to keep an eye out for. Have you checked the site?"

"I have. Whatever Medea did repaired the dimensional walls enough for them to recover independently. That park will need to be quarantined for a while. That much death and blood, especially demonic, can often lead to cursed locations. We will need to watch it to see how it develops."

"I will have the PRT keep an eye on it. It is their jurisdiction now that the active crisis is over."

"Then I'm going to sleep," Strange sagged. "I'll be out of it for a few days. I've been up

for over a month."

"Get some rest," Batman nodded, knowing how busy the man had been since the Elden Lord's landing.

"One last thing," Strange said before closing the communication. "I've heard some disquiet from the magic community of late."

"The Blinding?" Batman asked, aware of how the Elden Lord's arrival had disrupted all prophecies.

The Clairvoyant's most recent prediction was proven wrong within half a day.

"Many people are still reeling from that," the Sorcerer Supreme nodded, then shook his head. "This is something else. A lot of people are running scared. Hiding away, setting up more potent wards, only travelling in groups and only when needed. I've even had a few come to me to ask for transportation out of the dimension."

"Anything concrete?"

"Near as I can tell, a Council of Skyfathers was convened while I was gone, and factions split. I don't know what about or along what lines, but it has scared anyone connected to the Divine. Some of them are claiming the end of the world. Others are saying it's a new diluvian-esque judgment. Most are taking a wait-and-see approach. These same people are always freaking out about one thing or another, though never to this degree."

"I'll have Stark talk to Thor when he returns from Asgard," Batman responded, wishing he had more insights into the magical community for the millionth time. "I'll hit up some contacts. Get some rest. You're dead on your feet."

"I'll do that." The Sorcerer Supreme cut his feed, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

Batman quickly sent off encrypted messages to the rest of the Illuminati, filling them in on what he decided they needed to know and asking for updates.

Stark was attending another gala, so he wouldn't respond till tomorrow when he woke up and sobered up.

Parker answered right away. He'd have their project ready by the end of November. Hopefully in time to be used in the next Endbringer fight.

Xavier reported the new White Queen of the Hellfire Club would be a possible recruit.

Batman would have to look more deeply into Emma Frost and her recent rise to the top before he agreed to put forth feelers. Her intelligence wasn't in question after her recent actions with the club. She must have been planning that coup for years. She had also been willing to work with the heroes when they had been planning to confront the Elden Lord in Australia, so she was at least heroic leaning.

The group were looking for a few recruits after Doom left them to govern his country,

and Richards retired with the rest of their family. It had been years, and over a dozen other candidates had been rejected by the group for one reason or another. They could start the process of testing her next week.

Batman was still more partial to admitting Dragon to the Illuminati. She was one of the best Tinkers on the planet and had a solid moral compass despite being an AI. Her inclusion would also free him up from communication and aid in his development of the Watchtower and other projects.

And should worst come to worst…

Batman looked at the briefcase encased in one of his containment bays, and for a second, his scowl lighted just a tad.

Then it was gone, and he was back to work contacting the last active member of the Illuminati, even if only for inclusion.

Luthor was focused on winning his upcoming election to the Senate and wasn't likely to involve himself in the group's affairs for another month or so.

After the Illuminati, Batman also sent a message to Constantine, hoping the unreliable mage would answer within the month. Then he directed Damian to consult Zatara on anything she might know about the recent unrest Strange had noticed.

Then Batman spent five minutes dealing with Bruce Wayne's correspondence.

Nothing of note, just an invitation to a charity ball, notifications of his stock portfolio, the monthly status update of Wayne Enterprises, and other miscellaneous letters and messages.

There was a brief interruption when Alfred brought him lunch, but then Batman returned to studying the Elden Lord's actions on the 30th.

As he was watching the clips for the thirty-seventh time, he paused. Then rewound.

Footage of the Diamond Heights Shopping Center was plentiful, thanks to all the security cameras. The events in Glen Canyon Park were also well documented, thanks to the size of the gate and the length of the fight.

Unfortunately, that is where their luck ran out.

The few public cameras along the beachfront had been too far away from the ritual site to have any good look at the exact goings on, and what they did have was soundless.

Batman could read lips, even if the images were grainy, and the words matched Raven's account, so that was a small blessing to know there weren't inconsistencies in her story that would point to her being compromised.

It wasn't the lips he was staring at, though.

He was staring at a bright, floral print shirt. It was open, exposing most of the Elden Lord's chest.

Then Wrath was killed in a shower of gore, and the bright colours were dyed bloody red and brown.

Batman watched, eyes unblinking as the camera, zoomed in as much as possible, moved forward one frame at a time.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Cli- There!

Batman froze the image, pulled up the last frame, and placed them side by side.

Both pictures had an awful shirt covered in blood and viscera.

One of them had an equally bloody chest.

The other was completely clean of blood except for a few drops still being absorbed into tan flesh.

Batman couldn't scowl any harder at this point.

But he tried.

Author's Note:

So I sat down to write some lewds, and this happened.

I don't regret it, as a mini epilogue was needed and, like all SS, this will put parts of the rest of the story into context. We aren't done with the Titans completely, and we will be checking in on them occasionally, but I wanted to provide some small perspective on how Raven (both of them) are dealing with things.

I am still going to give you guys the promised lewds, though.

So, next week will have two releases. One on Valentine's and the other on the regular Friday release.

I'll see you then.

PS: Intro songs used in Volume 2 for those curious:

Emancipation 1: Woe to the People of Order (Technoblade Tribute), Cami-cat
Emancipation 2: Peace of Mind, Boston
Emancipation 3: Candle in the Wind, Elton John
SS 1: Feel Like Making Love, Bad Company
SS 2: Grave Digger, Blues Saraceno
SS 3: Welcome to the Internet, Bo Burnham
Emancipation 4: Every Breath You Take, The Police
Emancipation 5: Kryptonite, 3 Doors Down
Emancipation 6: Live Like You Were Dying, Tim McGraw
Emancipation 7: Doomsday, Globus
Interlude: Devil Inside, J2
SS 4: Never Met A Girl Like You Before, Iggy Pop & the Stooges

SIDE STORY VIII:
DEVIL'S PRIDE (ADULT)

The sky it flashed, heave ho, heave ho
His pillow toed to the brink
The curtains ran between my legs as we began to sink
I closed my eyes, heave ho, heave ho
As the ship was rent and fell
Eddies in the water headed to the mouth of Hell
"Hush now, hush love, here's your gown."
There's the bed, lantern's down."
"I'm begging you please wake me up
In all my dreams I…"

"How'd it go," I asked Raven as she formed from my shadow.

"You were right," she said with a sigh. "She still didn't believe he was gone."

"I'm always right. Life would be so much easier if people just assumed that and did everything I told them to," I replied, puffing up my chest with exaggerated pride.

Raven rolled her eyes.

I grabbed her by the waist, pulling her flush against me and knocking her white and red hood from her head. My Island was already plunged into the night when the sun set in San Francisco.

I took a moment to stare at her.

Pale skin shone in the light of the moon, her white cloak the only source of brightness atop the otherwise empty meadow I had chosen. We were high enough to see the Island but not high enough to breach the clouds.

The stars glittered in her dark purple hair, and amethyst eyes met mine, emotions flickering in them briefly before her control exerted itself and she regained her placid look.

I smirked down at her. She wasn't the smallest of the family, but she was close. Despite that, her form was full and lush, sinful even. It compelled me to rub and explore her body, to drown in pleasure, but I held firm.

For now.

"Being afraid of Demon Lord like Trigon is smart," I continued, fingers ghosting along her lower back as I talked. "I was. But I absolutely cannot stand blind faith. And the fear she felt for Trigon was just that in another form. Nothing is perfect. Nothing is eternal. Everything is flawed. Everything will end. She just needed to see it to believe it. It will be a while before it really sinks in. She's young. She'll learn."

“I told her I’d look out for her,” Raven said, her voice monotone but breathing heavy. “Train her.”

“If you want to, I won’t stop you,” I nodded casually as I tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “But that is for tomorrow. It is still your birthday for a few more hours. Let’s send it off with a bang.”

Raven was in the middle of rolling her eyes at the pun when I picked her up by her ass and kissed her.

The kiss started gentle, almost hesitant on her part. As the seconds dragged on, Raven untensed bit by bit and started to lean into my touch more and more. Eventually, she let me in, and our tongues danced.

My hands were busy luxuriating in the fullness of her rapturous rear.

If I were forced to choose my ‘type’ at gunpoint, I’d have to say I was a breast man.

To quote a wise sage, ‘Oppai are heavier than a man’s life.’

But that was incredibly reductive, and I… was a true gentleman.

Yes, breasts were glorious.

But so were butts, thighs, legs, navels, and almost every part of a woman’s body.

You did not just love a walking pair of breasts but the complete package.

So, when I say this, know I am not speaking casually or from ignorance.

Raven’s bodacious booty was the stuff of legends.

Thick globes filled my hands and spilled over. Not an ounce of flab or sag. The flesh was tight and springy with a layer of essential muscle under comfortable padding.

Forget bouncing a quarter off it. You could bounce a hundred-dollar bill off these cheeks and send it to the moon.

Her form-fitting leotard only accentuated the appeal, and I considered it a crime of the highest nature that this terrific tush was hidden by her cloak.

Then again, I was a possessive bastard, so I appreciated that this amazing ass was all for me.

As we kissed, I luxuriated in the feel of her remarkable rump. Hefting, squeezing, and kneading it with joy. Of course, one of my hands danced along her body, teasing, tickling, caressing, and exploring. I paid appropriate homage to her breasts, pressed against my chest, but I always returned to her beautiful butt.

Even as I explored her body with my hands and her mouth with my tongue, she returned the favour. One of her hands was possessively gripping my hair, holding me fast to her, while the other spent considerable effort fondling my chest and abdomen.

And my butt.

I wasn’t the only one appreciative of a bountiful bottom.

We were moving against each other, grinding, grasping, fondling, and consuming each other in a dance as old as any sin.

Then, as my hands started removing her skin-tight uniform, she froze for a second.

Pulling away from her bruised lips, I met her lust-clouded eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s too much,” she responded, panting for breath between every word. “She’s being loud.”

“Hm?”

From my understanding, Raven maintained control of her powers and emotions by delegation. At any given point, one of her emoticlones was dedicated to maintaining absolute management of her powers. This allowed her to experience the full range of emotions without suppressing them as she had her entire life.

They all counted as one being, feeling the same things. Any of the emoticlones, Pride included, could be the ‘public’ persona, but more often than not, it was Raven’s primary consciousness, simply due to her being the best middleman.

To hear that I had drawn enough conflict between the various personalities through a bit of kissing and some heavy petting fed my ego.

“Sorry,” she responded. I caught an impression of regret on her impassive face. Her monotone voice contrasted the blush on her face and the situation. “I did promise she’d get to go first.”

As she talked, I caught sight of her cloak.

The garment had been tossed to the ground in our movements, but my eyes still saw the red spreading over the once-white cloth. In less than a second, crimson had replaced the white, leaving the cloak a dark red with a white circlet woven into the hood.

Pride’s four red eyes looked up at me, her mouth curved into a lustful smirk.

“My monster,” she purred, a hand brushing my jaw in an almost gentle gesture.

Then she was on me.

Her short stature proved to be little problem as she jumped, wrapping her legs around my waist and grinding her mound into my crotch. Her mouth assaulted mine in a frenzy of desire, her tongue trying to wrestle mine into submission. One of her hands held my hair once more, only now it was a harsh tug that would have hurt any lesser man.

The other hand, nails sharpened to claws, tore my shirt to shreds in a burst of violent tugs.

“I liked that shirt,” I said with a pout as I pulled away from her lips. I had to use quite a bit of strength as she did not want me to stop.

“I was hideous,” Pride said between kisses along my jawline.

“That was the point,” I nodded. “I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“Hmmm?” Pride hummed in question as she suckled at my neck.

“A subtle fuck you to everyone,” I explained, my hands tweaking her engorged nipples through her leotard. She moaned. “I’m so powerful that I don’t have to dress nice or put on a costume. I can show up in shorts and an eye sore like that, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. How many other people can say killed a demon lord in flip flops?”

Pride let out a deep, lustful chuckle as she released my neck, hickey firmly in place.

Her thrusts against my groin increased in ferocity.

“You are right,” Pride purred, pausing her kissing. “I do like that.”

And then, finally fed up, she burned away my shorts, leaving me naked in the night air.

“Did you just dry hump my underwear into oblivion,” I asked with a smile, looking down.

My naked cock was trapped between us, pressed tightly against the damp fabric of her outfit. Her arousal had formed a wonderfully distinct cameltoe that would have been obscene even in the best circumstances.

“I’m anything but dry,” she drawled, grinding against my length once more for emphasis. “And you are mine!” She declared passionately, shoving her leotard aside and impaling herself on my dick. “My monster.” She sighed in contentment.

I grunted.

My demonic wife was, perhaps unsurprisingly, incredibly hot.

Figuratively and literally.

Wet too.

And tight.

But it was the heat that stood out to me the most. It was like a furnace. A human probably would have lost his dick. I, who had bathed in lava and endured the Fires of the First Flame, enjoyed the warmth for a moment.

Then she began moving.

Her cunt massaged my length as she rocked her hips back and forth, obviously experienced with passion. It was a steady rhythm, slow and sensual, focused more on gyrating than the traditional thrusting.

My dick, consumed to its base, never felt the night air as Pride did her best to bring me to orgasm through skill alone.

I might have let her had she not opened her mouth.

“Yeeeesssss,” she hissed, gyrating her hips slowly. “You are mine! This dick is mine! Your children will be mine! Forget the others. With my new power, we do not need them.

Be mine and only mine! MY Monster!”

Yeah. No.

Intellectually, I knew this was only one facet of Raven. Her darkest, most deviant desires. Everyone had those feelings, no matter how saintly they pretended to be. My wife’s were more developed than others due to her demonic heritage and ability to disassociate those personality traits.

On top of that, she was hyped up on Demon Lord juice.

I couldn’t blame her when I knew I was an incredibly possessive bastard myself.

At the same time, any faction’s greatest weakness comes not from outside forces but from infighting.

Best nip this in the bud right now.

I grabbed her hips, freezing them in place with my firm grip.

Pride smirked up at me, unbothered.

“That’s a nice look you have there, monster,” she purred, massaging my length with expert control of her inner muscles even as our bodies remained still.

“I need to correct a few things,” I said.

Then I collapsed to my knees, slamming Pride’s back against her cloak on the ground.

“Urk,” she grunted in surprise from the blow.

I was firmly against any sort of domestic violence. Always had been and always will be.

Pride?

She shuddered at the violence, not orgasming but relishing the blow non the less.

Sticky Fingers was great for telling me my partner’s boundaries.

And the new Demon Lord did not have any.

In a move that would have been difficult, if not impossible, for a regular mortal, I lifted Pride up once more and grabbed her thighs. With enough strength to dent metal, I pulled them apart until her legs were spread and no longer trapping my waist.

Still impaled on my dick, I spun Raven’s body, the friction sending pleasure to both of us instead of the injury it would have caused most people.

Then I slammed Pride down on the ground once more.

“Urk,” she grunted again, still unhurt in the least. Rising to her hands and knees, she threw a smirk over her shoulder at me, four red eyes daring me to go further. To push more. “Harder.”

The entire time, she had not stopped working her kegel muscles to try and drag me to orgasm.

“Let me explain something to you, puny demon,” I said in a conversational tone. I

grasped Pride's hair tightly, holding her head in place to meet her eyes. "I love Raven. You are a part of her, so naturally, I love you too." Pride smirked, opening her mouth to say something else. "But."

I withdrew until only my tip was still inside her. She squirmed, hips bucking in an attempt to get me back inside.

I held her in place.

"You are not her. Not fully. You are a fraction of a fraction of who she is. I am not yours. You are mine. Ours. Our little murder tool. A pet. A rabid dog. We'll let you off the leash to bite our enemies. That is all you are good for. Still, if you are a good girl, you get rewarded."

I slammed myself into her with enough force that the earth under her red cloak cratered from the impact. Her ass, those wonderful peach-shaped globs of flesh, wobbled hypnotically from the blow.

Pride's eyes, all four of them, widened as her mouth opened in a grunt/moan.

"If you are a bad girl," I continued, holding still balls deep in her. "If the pet starts thinking it's the owner, then it gets nothing but scraps. Love. Happiness. Knowledge. Bravery. I'm sure they are chomping at the bit to replace you. To be good girls. And Raven would let them if I told her to."

My other hand grasped her left breast roughly and twisted.

Pride moaned again.

God, I love supernaturally tough bodies.

"Never forget. It was I who gave you Trigon on a silver platter. I am not yours." I leaned forward. My body covered her tiny frame entirely, and I allowed not an inch of movement. My words were purred in her pointed ears. "You. Are. Mine!"

"Yeeeeeesssssss,"Pride gasped.

"Yes, what?" I murmured gently as I nibbled on her ear and lit up every one of her nerves with pleasure.

"Yes, Daddy!" Pride screamed as she came. Her cunt undulated and spasmed against my length, trying to milk me for all I was worth.

I held on, riding out the wave of pleasure.

I was a bit surprised by the whole 'daddy' thing, having been going for more of a 'sir', 'boss', or 'master' if she was feeling kinky.

I internally shrugged, not allowing the surprise to show on my face.

Whatever made her happy.

"Good girl," I said softly. I rose to my knees, leaving Raven's body shuddering as it lay on the cloak.

Withdrawing myself again, I repositioned Pride's ass to the perfect height.

I slammed forward, only slightly more gently than before.

Better I pound this lesson into her now rather than risk infighting in the Family. So far, there had been minimal conflict despite the larger-than-life personalities of the women. Largely thanks to their maturity and friendship with one another, as well as some of them being lovers.

My movements were steady and rhythmic for all their brutality.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," Pride chanted like a mantra in her delirium.

"Good girl," I repeated for lack of better things to say. "You're a real Daddy's girl, aren't you? Are you ready to be mine?"

It wasn't my fetish, but I was happy to work with my wives exploring their own so long as it wasn't an actual turnoff for me.

I pulled back slowly and slammed forward instantly. I delighted in how Raven's ass responded, and one of my hands was always fondling it.

I was going to fuck that ass one day.

Not today, though.

"Yours, yours, Daddy's good girl. All yours. Your pet. Your daughter. Your slut. I'll be a good girl, so fuck me. Beat me. Rape me. Just keep fucking me!"

I grimaced at the word 'rape'.

I really did not like that.

But I could stomach a bit of roleplay if it got her off. So long as it was between two consenting adults, I didn't think anything was wrong with fantasies.

As violent as I was being with Pride, I didn't forget that today was all about Raven.

"You don't tell me what to do," I growled, pressing her head into the ground. "You lay there and take what you are given."

After I was done with Pride, I'd be much gentler with the other emoticlones and Raven herself.

Didn't want her to think less of herself or that my words and actions were anything more than bedroom fun.

"DAAAADDDYYYYYYY!" Pride screamed to the moon and the stars as I came inside her.

Then she collapsed.

Sweaty, her leotard sticking to her skin, she looked like a mess. Her hair was dishevelled, her four eyes glassily staring at nothing as she panted for breath. Her ass was red from the rough pounding I had given it, and her cunt twitched as it leaked my cum onto her cloak.

I had killed a demon lord a few hours ago, yet this sight filled me with more pride than Trigon falling for my trap.

Then Raven's cloak turned pink, and Happiness jumped on me and rained kisses on my face.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," she repeated in between smooches. "She's so mean."

Sometimes, I think my wives are more quirky than I could ever be.

Grabbing Happiness' cheeks, I kissed back gently.

"You're welcome," I say. "Now it's your turn."

Then again, I would absolutely hate it if they were boring.

Author's Note:

Welp, sorry for the shorter release. I wanted to double post this week with two smut side stories, and I had intended this one to be released on Valentine's.

Then I got sick.

Not Covid, thankfully, but I have been fighting a fever all week. I wasn't willing to break my streak of a release on Friday, so I pushed myself to get this out. Sorry if it is a bit rougher than my usual work.

I hope to make up the difference next week when I am feeling better. For now, I'm going to pop some pills and lie down.

I'll see you then.

SIDE STORY IX:
AMAZONIAN DIPLOMACY (ADULT)

You make me wonder, woman
How do you do it?
Some superpower
I don't understand
You make me wonder, woman
How do you do it?
You're superhuman
And I'm just a man

"Do you have a minute to talk," Diana asked, her face upside down in my vision.

"Sure," I said, putting down my book. "What's up?"

"It is a matter of some… privacy," the amazon admitted as her eyes roved over what I was mentally calling the 'Cuddle Pile of Doooom'.

The Family had set up a 'reading room' equidistant from the library and the kitchen as a gathering spot.

Essentially, it was a room big enough for the whole Family renovated to be as comfortable as possible. The floor was a big bowl, and the entire floor was made supernaturally soft, warm and cozy. Then we pilled in cushions, blankets and pillows, and Medea had created enchanted trays to float around and carry drinks and snacks.

When we first landed, and I was still Baby Cthulu for the first month on Earth, we had spent more than a few nights here.

The fourteen of us all pilled in here, talking, napping, laughing, reading, and getting to know each other better.

In the week and change since I had gotten my body back, the whole Family hadn't had the chance to gather together, but I still enjoyed spending time here with the others.

After the craziness of the last week, it was nice to relax.

Right now, Robin and Melina were at my sides reading, Medea was leaning against my legs doing the same, and we were all wrapped in Priscilla's tail as she played a handheld game while she lay behind me.

Since there were only four of them, it was only a 'pile' instead of a 'Cuddle Mountain of Doooooooooooom'.

Medea (cat) had also joined us. She, as always, decided my chest was the best place to nap, so I was lying on my back and holding my book aloft when Diana poked her head over Priscilla's tail.

“How private,” I asked with a grin. “On a scale of ‘the book Melina started writing that she thinks we don’t know about,’ to, ‘I must kill all witnesses, their pets, and burn their houses,’ where do you say it lands.” Robin and Medea chuckled. Priscilla was too engrossed in her game, her tongue sticking out of her lips in concentration.

Without looking up from her book, Melina raised her hand to flick my nose.

I sneezed, and Medea (cat) gave me the most offended look I have ever received. Thankfully, she accepted compensatory payment in the form of throat rubs.

Diana rolled her eyes, but I saw her lip twitch upwards as my dragon/cat/thing returned to purring on my chest.

“Somewhere in the middle,” Diana responded. Her face looked serious, almost grim. “May we speak in my room?”

“Sure,” I said easily, sensing this might be really important. “I just finished a chapter anyway.”

Putting a bookmark in place, I plopped my cat Robin’s lap with my book. The feline(?) looked offended again, but a few limbs sprouted to pamper her.

Appropriate tribute paid, she went back to sleep.

The following escape from ‘Cuddle Pile of Doooom’ was a tale worthy of epics.

Involving no less than a Maiden, Witch, Dragon and Devil, sixteen kisses, one angry cat(?), and more inappropriate groping than was allowed in an R-rated movie, the story of my escape was the most fantastic tale never told.

But if Robin felt me up one more time, I was diving back in and giving her a piece of my mind, exhibitionism be damned.

“After you,” I said to the superheroine while giving the former pirate the stink eye.

That mysterious ‘Ara ara?’ smile might fool others, but I am on to you, you fiend.

“Is Raven with you?” Diana asked as she led me toward the foyer.

“She’s being introduced to the Titans by her younger self and Glynda,” I explained. My mind was only half on the words. The other half was watching the delicious sway of her hips.

Wonder Woman was in ‘uniform’, which did nothing to deter my gaze. It wasn’t the star-studded bloomers from classic comics, but the armoured kilt didn’t really hide anything either to maximize maneuverability. She wasn’t even doing it on purpose. Just the natural sway of her hips was hypnotic to me.

“Good,” Diana let out a small sigh of relief as we ascended the stairs to the second floor. “This is hard enough as it is with just you.”

“Is everything all right?” I asked, tearing my eyes from those amazing thighs to watch her back worriedly. It wasn’t like her to dance around issues like this. The Diana I knew

was confident, proud, and almost blunt with her problems.

"It is," she responded, but I detected a hint of nervousness in her usually confident voice. "I'll explain more in my room."

"You're giving me ominous foreshadowing vibes here," I joked. "Next thing you'll me is you are actually a dude, also my long lost brother with testicular cancer, and you need my left nut to survive. And you're pregnant with my child."

Diana stopped in the hall, turning to look at me in complete befuddlement.

"I watched too many soap operas with Glynda," I shrugged with a grin, tension wholly defused.

"How does any of that make sense," she said, shaking her head in disbelief as she continued to her room.

"I know," I agreed readily. "And it's supposed to be 'relatable'. Give me JoJo any day. That is much more normal."

"That is the animated show you are infatuated with, correct?" Diana asked as she opened her door and led me into her room.

"Infatuated is a strong word," I say, following her in. "I like the mind games in it, the creativity in the powers, and I think it's funny as all hell and has some good stories to tell. It has flaws, though. And to be honest, I was always more of a Fate fan, but that has fewer memes. But I doubt you asked me here to discuss the intricacies of fandoms and the best mediums to consume them."

I had never been in her bedroom before, but I didn't bother looking around in surprise.

Thanks to the Dream, I knew every inch of the Island, the Mansion included.

Despite going against the laws of physics, Diana's room was not a room at all. It was a hilltop temple with a greek bath attached with no windows or walls obstructing the view of the ocean at the southern tip of the Island.

The door was connected to no wall, just the marble floor of the temple-like structure we stood in. Half a dozen marble pillars held up a circular dome of stone, but there were no walls, only silk curtains hanging and swaying in the ocean breeze.

There was no obstruction to the view, but I knew we were wholly hidden when looking in from the outside.

"You're right," Diana said, setting her sword and shield on their racks. Removing her armoured boots, she continued softly. "There are two things I wish to discuss."

"Shoot." I laid out on one of her wicker divans and watched her undress.

"The first, are you still angry?"

Unfortunately, she stopped at her boots and circlet, leaving her still in her armour and

bracers with her Lasso at her hip.

“Angry? About what?”

“Me and Artoria fighting Doomsday as we did,” the Amazonian sat on the opposite divan and met my eyes steadily.

This was more like her.

“Why would I be?” I asked.

“Trigon. You told neither of us the plan.”

“Hey,” I protested. “I did tell you both I was doing something for Raven, and it would give Scathach a fun time.”

“You also said it wasn’t going to be that bad,” Diana countered. “Not that you would be going toe-to-toe with one of the strongest foes of the League.”

“In my defence,” I answered with a grin. “When I say I am going show Scathach a good time, did you think it would be small?”

“Fair enough,” Diana said with an amused huff before giving me a slight glare. “You still deliberately excluded us. Why would you do that if you weren’t angry?”

“Before I answer that,” I sighed and sat up to meet her eyes on an equal level. “Answer me this. What did you feel when you realized we were fighting Trigon, that he was here?”

“I was…” Diana paused to search for the best words. “Terrified. I know you are strong, but Trigon is a multi-dimensional devil. Artoria has never fought him, so she doesn’t understand just how absurd of an existence he is. Hearing that he was here, on earth, and that you were fighting him… I thought my heart would stop. That I would lose you. I flew as fast as I could. To arrive there, to see you safe, I can’t say how relieved I was.”

“That fear, that terror you felt, I felt that when I saw you and Artoria fighting Doomsday,” I responded gently, taking one of her hands and squeezing it in reassurance. “You are strong. She is strong. I am strong. We all are capable, powerful, and intelligent people. But we are not the best. Not even close. I know you know that. The multiverse is a big place and filled with dangers. I wanted you to understand where I was coming from when I urged you to communicate.”

“I get it.”

“Do you?” I pressed gently. “I may have come up with the plan to kill Trigon, but I was hands down the most useless in the actual execution. My role was essential mook control and keeping Raven alive while killing time. Glynda kept the Titans alive and ran damage control. Scathach pulled some next-level shit with that Geass. We hadn’t planned that. It was all her. When the gate opened, Robin, Tsunade, and Yoruichi saved dozens of

lives before Scathach arrived. Ranni was Guiding evacuation from behind the scenes. And Raven was the only one who could actually defeat Trigon. If any of them hadn't been there, we would be dealing with casualties in the triple digits if we survived at all."

"I get it!" Diana repeated, this time with feeling. Her hands grasped mine tightly as if afraid I would disappear. "I feel like we've had this argument before."

"But now you know where I am coming from," I held her hand and smiled. "I didn't want to make you feel bad about being a hero. I was just scared you'd find some hill to die on. Some cause to sacrifice yourself for without asking for help. I am not asking you to change who you are. I would never do that. So, I will ask for a promise for the third and final time. A promise to reach out and ask for help. We are a Family. We are here for you."

"I promise."

This time, when she said the words, I believed her.

"Thank you," I said softly. Then I grinned. "Now that that is out of the way, I will admit part of the reason I didn't tell you two was because I was being a petty bastard. Not a huge part. Just ninety-nine percent pettiness, one percent reconciliation."

"You know, sometimes I wonder why we put up with you," Diana huffed, but I could see the crinkling at the side of her eyes.

"My long flowing locks of hair," I suggested with a sly grin. "My rugged handsomeness? My razor-sharp wit? My killer sense of humour? My butt? According to some, it is my best feature."

"You have a nice butt," Diana admitted with a teasing smile. "But I'm not certain about the rest."

"Ouch," I winced, pretending to sniffle. "That is the meanest thing anyone has ever said to me. I'm going to cry."

"Really?" Wonder Woman deadpanned.

"Really," I sniffled again and pretended to dab at my eye. "I am a very sensitive soul. My ego is fragile."

"No, it's not," the amazon retorted immediately. "I think your ego is the strongest thing in existence."

"That is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me," I said, fake tears forgotten as I leapt to pull the heroine into a hug. She rolled her eyes in exasperation but did not resist as I dragged her to my divan. "I wuv you. Yes, I do. Mwah" I gave her a big, exaggerated kiss on the forehead.

I expected her to push me away and wipe her face. Diana wasn't one for exaggerated displays of affection like this, even in private.

She didn't.

She stayed in my arms, head bowed and hands grasping my shirt.

“Hey,” I said gently, sensing something off with her behaviour. That timidity I had noticed before was back. “What’s wrong?”

“’s ‘othing.” I heard her mumble into my chest.

I was actually worried now.

Diana never acted like this. She had her pride, a dignity engraved deep in her bones that never left even in the lowest of lows. She wasn’t shy, submissive, or demure in the slightest.

“You can tell me,” I said gently. “If it’s something I said, let me know. I won’t take offence. Ninety percent of everything that comes out of my mouth is bullshit anyway. I don’t understand why anyone thinks differently.”

Diana chuckled, rumbling my chest.

There was a beat of silence.

Then she sat up, disentangling herself from me and sitting on the edge of the divan while I lay behind her.

“Diana?” I asked softly.

“It’s the second thing I wanted to talk to you about,” she responded just as softly, facing away. Her hands were fiddling with her Lasso in nervousness.

“What is it?”

“I was talking with Medea,” she explained. “When we first argued. She helped me put things in perspective.”

“Okaaaay,” I said slowly, wondering where she was going with this.

“And I realized we’ve been taking advantage of you.”

“Le wut?” I asked, befuddled. “How so?”

“You are always at our aid,” Diana turned to meet my eyes, looking surprisingly serious. “Setting things up so I could rejoin the League, helping Raven with her father, funnelling resources to Emma, aiding Medea with her projects, helping Priscilla set up her music career, giving Scathach the fight she wanted, and allowing Glynda to teach again. That was just in the few days since you’ve had your body back. And all we’ve done is make trouble for you and get you involved in one crisis after another.”

“None of that stuff was hard for me,” I protested. “Trust me. I will never do something I really don’t want to. At most, it was a slight inconvenience. And you all helped me a ton in the past. You helped train me when I got out of the cell.”

“I gave you two lessons and some advice,” Diana said. “And that was years apart. You figured out most of it on your own.”

“But you helped,” I pressed. “Put up with my bullshit and emo phase. Hell, most of

the stuff you just said was tangential. I was killing multiple birds with one stone, so I wasn't being altruistic. You weren't taking advantage of me in the least."

"You might see it that way," Diana agreed. "But that does not lessen the fact that we wished to do something nice for you. A gift. Only we could not think of one."

"I'm not opposed to getting gifts," I grinned at her before mellowing it into a smile. "But I have everything I need. The love of beautiful women. A home. Bottomless wealth. Power that few could match. This is my happy ever after. I am content."

"So you see the problem," Diana nodded and looked away again. "What do you give the man who has everything? Anything you want, you can take for yourself. I thought long and hard. Especially after Trigon. What did I have that you did not. I already gave you my heart. The only reason we have not consummated our union was the lack of availability since you achieved a human form. My body was already yours, as well. There had to be something else."

"Diana?" I asked, almost fearfully at the tremble in her voice.

"Then it hit me," the amazonian continued, her voice quivering. "The one thing I had that you could have but would never take. The one thing that was mine alone to give."

She pressed something into my hands, and I looked down.

The Lasso of Truth was glowing softly in my palm.

My eyes followed the golden rope from my hands to its end, where it was wrapped around Diana's wrists.

"Diana?" I asked again, my voice a hoarse whisper.

"All I have left to give," her blue eyes burned into mine. There was a nervousness there but also a certainty. A resolution. "Is my Freedom."

I felt like I had been punched in the gut.

A sense of vertigo overwhelmed me, and my vision swam.

Then it narrowed, and all I could see was that golden rope binding her wrists.

This was…

Big didn't even begin to cover it.

A Dragon's Element, at least those from the catalogue, was not just the nature of their breath or a particular affinity they were predisposed to. It was a manifestation of who they were.

A crystalization of the concept of one's being.

A Dragon was not just a fire-breathing lizard that flew. They were forces of nature, rivalled only by the strongest existences.

In catalogue terms, even if you only purchased the most basic dragon heritage, you were guaranteed to reach Tier 10 by age alone.

As a contractor, I had been able to choose my Elements, but even then, they had a profound impact on my psyche.

Just as the Element reflected who you were, so did you become more in line with your Element as you aged and grew.

All of my wives who had undergone the transformation showed slight changes from the process.

Tsunade's desire for a child was partially fueled by her Life Element.

Scathach's bloodlust was enhanced by her Blood Element.

Thanks to Shadow, Raven changed her entire way of handling her emotions.

Emma, as a Diamond Dragon, became firmer in her convictions.

To be honest, if they weren't simply extensions of their own natures, I would be worried that I was controlling their minds. Further experimentation had allayed that worry for the most part.

Artoria was more heroic after becoming a Dragon of Light, but that was barely noticeable.

Priscilla's Death attribute manifested not as some grim reaper personality or a propensity for nihilism but rather to let the dead rest peacefully. She viewed the dead like she had her fellow residents of the painted world. My spirit ashes all liked to spend as much time with her as possible, and she welcomed them.

Medea being a Magic Dragon, had only enhanced her joy at experimenting and creating.

Altogether, we had been experimenting with our Elements. Learning what we could and could not do.

None of the women had unlimited power like me, so their expressions of their Elements were limited and highly based on the individual.

In the process, we learned about ourselves.

Tsunade's expression of the Life Element did not make her tougher to kill as it did me. It enhanced her healing abilities and allowed her to use her grandfather's famous Wood Release techniques.

Diana could not Free herself from absolutely everything like I could. Instead, it acted almost like an aura around her that freed others from their bonds.

She could stage a jailbreak while standing outside a prison and doing absolutely nothing, whereas I would need to go cell by cell, touching all the doors.

Personly, I believed that was a result of hearing tales about the tragedy that Themyscria was built in response to.

On the other hand, the Lasso of Truth could exert no influence over me but still held

sway over her if she was bound.

We were different people and thus had different expressions of our Elements.

Diana was Free in a way I would never be.

I, as a Dragon of Freedom like Diana, would never be able to give up my liberty.

The thought of willfully chaining myself, of handing over control to someone else, made me physically nauseous. It was one of the reasons I was so against reviving more people after Glory Girl, despite being able to mitigate their influence with Raven's aid.

Staring at the rope in my shaking hands with wide eyes, I couldn't help the word that slipped unbidden from my lips.

"Why?" I rasped.

"Because it is my Freedom to give," Diana answered firmly. Her earlier nervousness was gone now that the process was done. She was Wonder Woman once more. Princess of the Amazons. An icon for women everywhere. She had seen my response. She knew I understood the magnitude of her gift. "Because this is the only way I could think of to show you my trust in you. You might not be a hero, but I was not mistaken in who you are at your core."

I had a realization at that moment. A single moment of clarity that explained so much.

My Freedom was a selfish one.

A rejection of all chains that bound me, real or societal. A desire to chart my own path and be who I wanted to be.

I had to touch things to free them because 'I' was the only one genuinely Free.

Diana's Freedom was a selfless one.

She was Freedom as an Ideal. An aspiration for everyone. She stood for something grander than my selfish desire. The Freedom to choose for all, rejecting none.

I chose my own path, but she could choose any.

She was Free to believe in others, whereas I could only believe in myself.

We both had the same Element but could not be any more different.

"Alright," I said slowly, hand tightening on the divine tool. It weighed less than a pound but felt like a mountain.

Any doubt, any bitterness I once felt toward the woman for her words in the Kiln was swept away in the golden glow of the Lasso. The command seals were one thing. They could be resisted or interpreted at one's convenience or even dispelled by Rule Breaker.

The Lasso was absolute. As a Divine Instrument, Rule Breaker could not damage or destroy it. While Diana was bound, she was compelled to answer everything truthfully, hiding nothing. She also had to follow my every order.

I could have her spill her deepest darkest secrets. I could have her kill every one of

Justice League. It would be hard for her to do bound, but she would have to try.

"Alright," I said again, mind scrambling.

"You are repeating yourself, dear," Diana said with a smile.

She was the one bound to my absolute control, yet she sat there, proud as any queen, while I panicked.

She was Wonder Woman. THE Superheroine. An Icon. A Legend.

I was just a man.

But I had my own pride.

"This is my absolute order," I said, meeting her eyes with conviction. "No matter what happens after this, no matter what I say or do, this order will be followed without fail."

The Lasso glowed brightly as I channelled as much power into it as possible. I also activated all six command seals. All so that my words would be engraved upon her soul.

An immutable truth.

"You are Free!"

She was free to follow me.

She was free to untie her binds.

It would always be her choice.

But my words were also a promise.

If Diana's Freedom was a selfless one, then I had to be selfish enough for both of us.

I'd be selfish for her.

I could only walk my own path. That would never change. But I could make my path one she wanted to walk beside.

Diana's eyes never left mine as the glow of the Lasso and the seals faded.

Her smile was more beautiful than the Mona Lisa's.

"There is the face I fell in love with," she looked radiant as her bound hands raised to cup my face. "I knew you had conviction."

The kiss that followed was sweet, loving, and tender.

An affirmation of who we were, who the other was, and what we meant to one another.

When we separated, I didn't need Sticky Fingers to notice the passion and lust in her eyes. Nor did she need any supernatural ability to feel my own excitement.

"You know, that consummate our relationship thing," I said with a grin. "We're doing it now."

I wasn't giving her a choice on that.

"I would like that."

"Good," I nodded sagely. "Since this is our first time together, I will give you the

option.” Diana’s eyebrows raised in question. “I can make sweet, tender love to you. The kind out of fairy tales and romcoms. The lovey-dovey sex that would make romanticists die with envy.”

“Or?” Diana asked, her mouth quirked in amusement at my description.

“Or…” I didn’t say more. I just held up my end of the Lasso of Truth as the explanation. Diana’s eyes widened slightly in realization of my meaning. “What do you want?”

The Lasso glowed as it worked its magic.

“I’ve dreamed about our first time together,” Wonder Woman explained, unable to keep anything from me. “After talking to Artoria, I’ve imagined it countless times. Fantasized. Pleasured myself at the idea. In my mind, you are gentle. You are kind. You are everything I hope a man and woman can be together. We become one.”

I nodded, ready to make her dreams a reality.

Then she continued.

“I still desire that,” Diana could not stop herself from revealing the whole truth. “But not today. Right now, all I can think about is what you will do with my Lasso. With my Freedom. Will you force me to strip and parade me around as a trophy? Will you bind me and leave me to stew in my arousal? Will you tie me up and allow the rest of the Family to have their way with me as I lay helpless to resist? I am not as ignorant as I was when I first left my homeland. I have seen couples engage in such acts of depravity that I could not comprehend them at first. Now, all that fills my mind is a desire to explore this new aspect with you. I wish to learn why some women enjoy this act.”

With every sentence Wonder Woman uttered, I felt my surprise rise.

I would expect this kind of stuff from Glynda or Yoruichi, not Diana.

Honestly, I had thought this aspect of the relationship would be minimal. The Lasso largely symbolic of her ‘gift’ but not seeing much actual use in the bedroom.

Even if she had given me her ‘Freedom’, I had no desire to take advantage of her or do things she didn’t want to do.

Who knew Wonder Woman was BDSM curious?

Man, did I have my work cut out for me.

“Stand up,” I ordered as I rose to my feet. Diana did as she was told, unable to resist as I started to lead her to her bed. “Let me explain the absolute basics of this type of relationship. It’s not for everyone. It can come in thousands of different forms, but they all have one absolute rule that must be followed.”

Since Diana’s room was always the warm temperature of Themyscria, her bed was more like a larger divan with a few thin sheets and pillows, surrounded by four thin

marble pillars from which light silk drapes hung.

“Some only like a bit of light bondage, fluffy handcuffs, silk ties, that sort of thing,” I explained once we reached the bed. “Lay down.” She did, and I tied the end of the Lasso to the headboard. “Others go a bit further. Laytex, nipple clamps, gags, toys of all sorts. Some like pain, whips, chains, hot wax, paddles, and other ways of inflicting pain without actually doing damage. Some like roleplay, horseplay, or even let their fetish out of the bedroom and make it part of their day-to-day lives.”

“You know a lot about it,” Diana commented as she lay there. Her arms were raised above her head, and she had to tilt backwards to look me in the eye. I finished with the knot and started working on unfastening her armour.

“I’ve never been part of a relationship like that, if that is what you are asking,” I said as I freed the fastenings and moved to set the armour on its rack. Those magnificent breasts were topped by dark nipples that accented her olive skin. “At one point in my life, I was working a graveyard shift and finished around midnight. My commute home involved walking past a BDSM-themed bar. It was all that was open without me going out of my way, so I would grab a few drinks there and talk to a few people.”

“Really,” Diana asked in disbelief, head craning up to watch me.

“They all respected my boundaries, so it was never a real problem, and you should know I feel no shame,” I grinned at her before working on removing her armoured skirt. It was easier than her armour, but I took the same amount of time because I wanted to enjoy the wonderful sight of her.

Three words.

Abs for days.

You could grate cheese on those things.

“The thing I learned, the absolute rule I was telling you about, is this,” I continued as I drank in her beauty. “The Dom, the Master, whatever you want to call it, is like a director. They set the scene, the pacing, the props, and the script. They control the tone and the actors. But it is the submissive, the one that is bound, blindfolded, whipped, and degraded, who has the final say. The go or no go.”

“That is counter-intuitive to my understanding,” Diana admitted as she lifted her hips for me to slide her last piece of armour down her legs.

I smiled in am as I saw the blue, star-studded panties.

“It is a requirement,” I emphasized. “It is the only thing that stops relationships like this from going wrong. A Dom that doesn’t stop when the Sub wants to or goes too far is an abuser at best and a rapist at worst.”

“I see.”

For a second, I stopped and admired my work.

Diana was laid out on her bed, naked as the day she was born, her blue eyes watching my every move. Her arms were raised above her head, and her hands squirmed in their binds. Her dilated pupils, erect nipples, the slight tremor of her abdomen, and the dampness of her core told me she was as turned on as I was.

Her form was well-muscled. Like me, it was a body built for war, and we lacked Artoria's appetite that ensured her body was always well-padded.

She had curves, large breasts, wide hips, and an ass to start wars, but her beauty was amazonian in nature rather than matronly like Tsunade or aristocratic like Robins.

Abs for days.

Thighs that could crush steel.

Arms that bench thousands of tons.

Though she was bound, she looked like a queen upon her throne.

For a second, I thought about how many men would look at her and go, 'Step on me, Mommy!'

I didn't say it, but my mouth quirked at the humour of the thought.

"What?" Diana asked.

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head and refocusing. It was time to enjoy my gift. To do that, I needed to learn. "I was wondering what everyone would say if they could see this sight. Wonder Woman. The icon of women laid out on her bed. Naked. Bound. At the mercy of a man."

I approached her slowly as I spoke my taunting words. As I did, I Freed myself from my clothes, and they fell to the ground behind me, leaving me as nude as she was.

Her eyes devoured me.

One hand trailed along her body as I approached the head of the bed.

From her ankle, it trailed up her shin, knee, and thigh. I wasn't pressing hard, but the flesh shivered under my touch.

"Would they think it an illusion, I wonder. A deception? Wonder Woman, the Princess of the Amazons, can't bind herself to a man. That is impossible."

My fingers curved around the dip between her legs.

Not yet.

Blue eyes followed the trail religiously as my hand traced well-defined abs upward between her breasts. My hand ignored the two proud mountains, continued to her throat and stopped at her chin.

"A woman like that couldn't be a bastion of Freedom," I said as I held her chin in place, and her eyes pierced mine. "A woman like that can only be a slut."

Diana was quivering with excitement and anticipation, turned on beyond belief.

But she was not the type to cave to her desires.

Even now, she retained her dignity. Proud. Defiant.

A woman to match and surpass any man.

“I do not care what anyone thinks,” the amazonian declared.

“Good,” I purred. “You are not theirs. You are Mine. Now open wide!”

Compelled by her own Lasso, Wonder Woman obeyed and opened her mouth.

I hissed in pleasure as I plunged the tip of my cock into her mouth, and she worked over the tip with her tongue.

I held her head firmly in place so she could not back away nor take me deeper.

“There’s a good slut,” I purred, combing her dark hair away from her face with one hand so I could stare into her eyes. “You’ll do as I say, and I will fulfill your every degenerate desire. Those filthy fantasies that run through your dirty little brain.”

“Hmmmmn,” Diana hummed, sending a shiver of pleasure from my dick to my spine.

“How often have you fantasized about this? About being bound and used?” I withdrew from her warm mouth and laid my dick along her face.

“A few times,” Diana admitted, compelled by her own tool to tell the truth. She did not look embarrassed in the least. “The first time a villain caught me with my Lasso, I wondered what it would be like with a lover. An idle thought I never explored. Slurp.” She continued to lick along my length as she talked, her eyes never leaving mine. “Either my partner was not the type to enjoy the act, were intimidated by me, or I did not trust them enough. Mwa. Once the internet was developed, I masturbated to the thought a few times, but that is it.”

“Now you’re just buttering me up,” I grinned as I inserted myself into her mouth again. This time I continued to press forward slowly and steadily. “I am the only one who’s seen your slut side. The only one who gets to use you like my own pocket whore. It gives me the warm fuzzies.”

Diana’s nose met my groin as I bottomed out in her throat. Even as I held her down and she deep-throated me, she continued to undulate her throat to milk the cum from my balls.

My other hand was not idle either. I pinched, groped, and slapped at Diana’s breasts, testing what she responded most to.

Learning your partner’s kinks, erogenous zones, and preferences usually is the result of weeks and months of careful study and honest conversation.

I was a cheating cheater who cheats.

Sticky Fingers did away with the need for all that. It did away with the need for safe

words, embarrassing conversations, or instructions. I knew when and where to push and pull. What was too much and too little.

I was Beethoven, and a woman's body was my instrument.

"Sluurp. Gahck. Hmmmmn."

Her mouth was occupied as I moved her head up and down along my length, but I still made her body sing.

Diana's breasts weren't sensitive like Robin's or Artoria's. Nor did she show many reactions from pain vs more pleasurable fondling. So she wasn't masochistic either.

Despite being tied up, she wasn't submissive at all. My cock was deep in her throat, but her eyes were firm and challenging.

A power bottom if there ever was one.

The amazon liked my body, but she wasn't as infatuated with my muscles as Robin.

So, why was she so excited?

"Glrk!" She gagged along my length as I picked up the pace of my thrust.

Wonder Woman did not need to breathe nearly as much as a regular person, nor was she as fragile, so I didn't worry about hurting her as I became rougher with her.

"You're going to swallow everything," I ordered. "Then I'm going to use another of your holes. You'd like that slut? I think I'll keep you here all day. Tied up and helpless. I'll use you as I please. Maybe I'll invite Artoria in when she gets home. Have her see the whore you've become."

I watched her like a hawk for her reaction to my every word. Diana seemed to show responses to the name-calling, but her most significant response was when I mentioned showing her to Artoria.

Exhibitionism, perhaps?

"Maybe I'll cast a few illusions on us," I grunted as I neared release. I could hold out indefinitely, but as enjoyable as Diana was finding this, she was no closer to her own orgasm than when we first started. I was anything but a selfish lover. "Go on a date, but you're naked the whole time."

"Sluuurp." Barely an extra twitch as her blue eyes continued to watch mine.

"I should invite the others," I said, trying a different tact. Perhaps I should play up her bisexuality? The amazon didn't blink. "How would you feel having thirteen women licking you while you could do nothing." A twitch, but that was it. "I imagine it will be a shock for poor, innocent Priscilla. The woman she looked up to, who trained her, was nothing more than a cum guzzling whore."

Diana slammed forward, taking me to the hilt once more. Her throat constricted as her eyes lost their focus.

I came.

Shot after shot of cum burst down her throat.

Held firmly in place, Diana did not choke or gag as her throat filled, and my release overflowed between her lips to dribble down her chin.

I held her there for half a minute, spending myself and making sure nothing was left before slowly withdrawing myself. The princess of the amazons licked and cleaned me on my way out.

“That was nice,” I said patronizingly as I pet her head.

Her eyes narrowing slightly was the first sign of displeasure since I started.

So dirty talk was fine, but dismissal or condescension was not.

Good to know.

But I had her weakness now.

“What now?” Diana asked, challenging me to continue or stop there.

I was nowhere near done.

“I promised to use another hole, didn’t I,” I grinned. Diana’s eyes narrowed again, this time in suspicion. But it was too late.

I kneeled on the bed, grabbed her muscular thighs, and spread them wide. She was more than aroused enough to not need more foreplay.

Then I plunged forward.

She was tight.

Not like Ranni or Raven, whose small size ensured it would be a snug fit no matter what happened. Wonder Woman was tight because every inch of her was trained, well-toned muscle.

Bottomed out in her, I leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

“You are a terrible influence,” I whispered to her. Her breath hitched.

“Of what do you speak?” She asked, her blue eyes wide with fear and arousal.

“What you did to Artoria. Tsk, tsk. You took that naive, trusting, virginal woman and turned her into such a slut.” Her cunt clenched around me. “I bet you wanted to do the same to Priscilla. Take her under your wing. Teach her the joys of the flesh. Corrupt her until she was only pure on the outside but a rampant whore on the inside. Just. Like. You.”

I squeezed her clit between my fingers, and Diana came.

Her eyes rolled back in her head as her arms thrashed in her bonds. Her thighs closed around me with enough force to bend steel, but I held her down, grinning at her loss of control.

Diana was not a submissive, exhibitionist, or masochist.

She had a corruption fetish.

The idea of something pure, untainted, and wholesome being tainted, soiled, and corrupted made her go wild.

Herself included.

Contrary to popular belief, a fetish wasn't a person's 'true self'.

A sadist could be a good person. A submissive could be domineering at work.

Wonder Woman could be a heroine, an icon of female empowerment, and a defender of justice and freedom during the day.

And a depraved slut at night.

The latter was only a part of who she was and did not detract in the least from the fantastic things she did.

But it sure was hot.

"By Hera," Diana panted, recovering from her orgasm to stare at me with wide eyes. "What was that?"

"Tell me this," I ordered with a grin, and the Lasso glowed. "How would you feel if I seduced your counterpart. If I took that naive, fresh-off-paradise island heroine and corrupted her. If I wormed my way into her heart and body. If I bound her and gagged her. If I made her beg for release. Begged to be my slut. Begged to be like you."

As I spoke, I kept up my steady rhythm of thrusts, increasing the pleasure my words brought.

Diana's eyes widened as she answered, her words seeming to surprise herself.

But she could hide nothing from the Lasso of Truth.

"I would feel betrayed. I know our relationship isn't conventional, but you are not the type to ever cheat," the amazon answered. The answer most would give was perfectly acceptable. I would never cheat, and the idea of anyone in the Family cheating was enough to fill me with a blinding rage in most cases. But I waited for the rest. "But the idea is incredibly arousing. The mere thought of it sends shivers down my spine. To see her face distorted with pleasure, covered in your semen and begging for more, it is… hnnnggg."

"Welcome to the dark side," I grinned at her as she shivered at the idea. "Now imagine this. I'm not content with you all. With your counterpart. I go after other heroines, and you help. They trust you, and you hand them to me on a silver platter. You don't have a choice. You are mine. But even if you weren't, you'd still help me. Because you are that much of a slut."

Diana moaned, her legs still wrapped around me, she urged me to hurry up. I was practically slamming into her, her bed rattling from every thrust.

"It's all consensual, of course," I purr, weaving the fantasy for her. "A slow seduction

does not need to force anyone. One by one, heroines fall. The League first. Then the PRT, then the independents, then we'll work on the villains. Reform them on my cock and your tongue. Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn, Cheetah."

"So hot," Diana gasped, bucking wildly at the mention of her one-time friend.

I doubt she had ever really entertained the idea. Her strong morals would reject it even if she had a stray thought about it. For the same reason, it would never actually happen.

Diana was too much of a hero to ever make that fantasy real. And if it did happen, she wouldn't really enjoy it, knowing what it cost.

But this was fantasy.

And I was not a hero.

"We'll fulfill Emma's wish of ruling the world. One cunt at a time." I delighted in her pleasure, in her unravelling. "Of course, once we've done that, there is only one place left to go."

"Where?" Diana gasped, wide-eyed and dishevelled.

"Themyscria," I purred the word, and Wonder Woman froze.

I kept going thrusting away as I wove my final words.

"Your home." Thrust. Slam. "Turned into my harem."

"Your neighbours." Thrust. Slam. "Cock-crazed."

"Your friends." Thrust. Slam. "Watching you getting bred with envy in their eyes."

"Your mom." Thrust. Slam. Crack. "Giving you a younger sister."

"Your gods." Thrust. Slam. Crack. "The virginal goddess begging for defilement."

"All." Thrust. "Our." Slam. "Sluts." Crack.

The headboard shattered as Diana tore her Lasso through it. Her arms wrapped around my head, hands still bound, as she pulled me in for a passionate kiss.

The collapsing under us went unnoticed as I unloaded into her orgasming cunt.

"You are a terrible influence," Diana told me after we had recovered.

Hair in disarray. Spittle flecked her chin. Cum oozing from her cunt around my dick.

Diana lay in the ruins of sheets, pillows, wood, and stone that was once her bed.

She still looked like a queen to me.

"I know," I agreed with a grin.

Then I kissed her, hand tightening around the Lasso of Truth.

******

The next day, when Wonder Woman met up with Artoria and her counterpart for their

shift with the League, her Lasso was at her hip as usual.

But underneath her bracers, if she ever took them off in public, an observer might notice something off before shaking their head in denial.

There was no way Wonder Woman would ever wear bondage clothe handcuffs.

Author's Note:

I have a severe problem.

Not my sickness. I am recovered from that.

I have a problem writing smut.

I sit down to write a quick and dirty short side story. A palette cleanser from the seriousness of the rest of the fic.

The next thing I knew, I wrote 8k words that could be counted as a chapter in its own right with world-building, reconciliation, and all sorts of lewds.

Send help.

In all seriousness, I wanted to write a sex scene with Wonder Woman, but I don't ever want to sacrifice characterization, so this is the result. Personal, intimate, and horny.

I hope I did both characters justice.

I'll see you next week.

PS: There are some questions about Mikael's abilities, so here they are.

He does have his Aura unlocked but doesn't have his semblance, nor does he have much training with Haki.

He can do anything the PC can do in Dark Souls, Bloodborne, or Elden Ring.

His Magic Talent means he quickly learns spells from Ranni, Medea, or Raven. He has other Talents too, but that is the main one. He has unlimited energy for spells and the like but is stymied by what body he channels it through.

Apart from that, his Elements are his greatest boons. Thanks to his pact with Death, he can talk to the dead and bring them back if he wants to (he doesn't).

There is a whole bunch of miscellaneous stuff from the catalogue, but I don't really focus on it, so I'll explain it if it comes up.

I won't spoil anything about his nature as an Eldritch Abomination.

In crude terms:

Dragon: Probably in the top 10 of the universe. Not counting multiversal-level beings. If he allows his body to be physically in the dimension, he could crack the earth with an errant sneeze.

Great One Avatar: Strongest on earth, probably. But anyone who sees it has their brains dribbling out of their ears in seconds.

Human meat suit over the avatar: Upper tier of the earth thanks to the flexibility of skills and experiences.

That is where he is at the moment.

SIDE STORY X:
KILLER RABIT (ADULT)

The sky is red, I don't understand
Past midnight I still see the land
People are sayin' the woman is damned
She makes you burn with a wave of her hand
Warning came, no one cared
Earth was shakin, we stood and stared
When it came no one was spared
Still I hear "Burn!"

My day was perfectly normal.

"I want to fight."

"Sip," I said before actually taking a sip of my tea. "Ok."

I was biting the inside of my cheek.

Perfectly.

Normal.

Scathach turned away from me to go outside, but I stopped her.

She hadn't gotten the hint I wanted to finish my tea.

Or that I was holding back.

"Did you just get back from your last day with the Titans?" I asked, taking another sip.

"I did." She nodded.

"How are they doing?" I asked, killing time a bit so I could finish my cup.

"As well as can be expected," the Celt explained, leaning against the doorway as she waited for me. "Starfire is sticking to Nightwing's side as much as possible while he trains to get back in shape." Sip. "X-23 is barely affected, but Mercury is still shaken and walking on eggshells around her." Sip. "Winman took a few days off to meet with his mentor again." Sip. "Beast Boy is repressing everything with humour." Sip.

"Uhuh," I nodded to show I was still listening as I finished the last of my tea. Then I asked the question that had been burning my tongue since she walked in and challenged me to a fight. "Have you changed since you got home?"

"No," she tilted her head in question. "Why?"

"No reason," I fought to keep my voice toneless, barely keeping from roaring with laughter. "So you just… showed up today? Wearing that? With no explanation?"

"Do I need an explanation?" Scathach asked, looking down at her outfit and then

looking up and meeting my eyes.

She saw nothing wrong, but her eyes were twinkling mischievously.

Scathach could be very playful if she was in a good mood.

I bit my lip. Hard.

I was so close to losing my shit.

“No.” I squeaked. “It’s just… a bit different than what you usually wear, is all.”

“I understand,” the Celtic queen nodded imperiously. The movement made her fake ears bob. My fists clenched hard enough to split my palms. “Don’t let your guard down just because I look like a lovable bunny. Know that this bunny has fangs.”

I lost it.

“Hahahahaha,” I cackled madly. “Oh god. Hahahaha. I can just imagine it. Hehehehehe. The look on their faces. Hahahaha.” My laughter was near hysteric as I pounded my fists on the counter. “Haha, Nightwing is, hehe, going to, hehe, tell, hahahaha, Batman!. Ohahaha.” Tears beaded my eyes as I fought down gasping breaths. I kept laughing. “He’s. Hehehehe. He’s going. Ha, oh god, hahahaha. He’s going to watch the footage.”

I fell from my stool I was laughing so hard.

If it was the last thing I ever did, I would get a copy of that footage.

Then I would play it in his face every chance I got.

Or maybe post that training online. It would drive the paranoid theorists and trolls absolutely wild.

‘What did this mean!? Was this an Elden Lord plot!?’

Oh god, I was dying.

I laughed for minutes straight at the images my mind conjured.

I could just imagine a ‘counter-bunny PRT task force’.

At one point, Melina walked into the kitchen, took one look at Bunny-Scathach, one look at me rolling on the floor in laughter, and walked out again.

“Thank you, dear, hehe,” I giggled, getting myself under control as I stood on unsteady feat. “Ha. I really needed that.”

“I fail to see what is so amusing, but you are welcome,” Scathach said, an almost imperceptible smile on her face.

“I have to ask. Why are you wearing that? Don’t get me wrong, it looks good on you. Really good. It’s just a bit odd.”

I wasn’t giving empty compliments. Scathach looked absolutely stunning.

It was the classic ‘bunny girl’ outfit.

A purple strapless bodysuit that hid nothing of her generous cleavage paired with dark

nylons that emphasized her long shapely legs. On her wrists were white detached cuff links and a pair of long purple rabbit ears atop her head. To top it off, she had a large cotton ball tail drawing attention to an ass that could start wars.

The Queen of the Land of Shadows, the woman who had taken on the armies of hell single-handedly only three days ago, looked like the ultimate wet dream made real.

Which just made it funnier to me.

“This bunny girl outfit? I’ve always been interested in them since Artoria wore one. I had Medea make one for me,” Scathach explained, looking over herself.

“Fair enough,” I shrugged. I wasn’t going to complain.

“It is easy to move around in,” she continued. For emphasis, she raised one leg completely vertically in the air in a display of balance and flexibility.

“I’m sure it is,” I said, watching her movements hungrily.

“Medea told me I should wear this to fulfill my promise to break your hips. Come on, let’s go.”

Without giving me any more time, Scathach turned and left the building. My eyes tracked that small fluffy tail as it swayed hypnotically in my vision.

“You mean in a fight, right?” I asked with a grin as I followed her. I hadn’t heard anything about this promise, but I was a kind man. I wouldn’t want her to break her word.

“That too.”

Oh boy, was I in for it.

My grin was feral as we exited the Mansion and passed the orchard to a broad field where most of the Family’s training and sparing was done.

Along the way, we passed the four dragons napping as the sun set, Medea (cat?) resting atop Cassandra’s head and splayed out. Using his ability to remain airborne after his rise in Tier, Torrent stole fruit from the top of the trees.

I was surprised when we passed the training field and into the forest.

“Do you have somewhere specific in mind?” I asked.

“I do.”

That was the only answer I received, so I focused on following that fluffy white tail as it entered the forest. After the first minute, I started to hum under my breath.

“We are young, heartache to heartache. We stand,” I sang, and Scathach looked over her shoulder at me before continuing deeper while picking up speed. I followed her easily. “No promises, no demands. Love is a battlefield.”

We ran through the Island, faster and faster, the trees blurring past us as I gained more and more speed.

Scathach was always in front of me, no matter how fast I moved. Always the exact

distance away from me.

Even now, before any fighting had begun, she was challenging me.

We broke not a branch, disturbed not a leaf, and left no print in the ground.

Our skill was such that the only mark of our passage was the wind passing through the trees.

The only sound was my singing, my voice even and unruffled as I chased her.

I finished Pat Benatar's 'Love is a Battlefield' and was halfway through Bonnie Tyler's 'I Need a Hero' when we reached the destination.

It wasn't anywhere special, just the foothills of the mountain range that cut off the southern tip of the Island, where we lived, from the rest of the enormous subcontinent. Once we crossed the first peak, we'd leave the bounded field I had set up to protect the Mansion from the more… esoteric animals.

We weren't going that far, though.

No sooner had we burst from the dense woods into an open area did Scathach whirl on me.

"Up where the mountains meet the heavens above, out where the lightning split-Oof."

The kick took me in the side, sending me flying end over end.

I crashed through three trees and came to an abrupt halt as my body slammed into a stony cliff side, cratering it.

"Ow." I deadpanned at the woman from my place upside down in the stone cliff. "That was rude. You gotta let a man finish. You'll scare him off if you're too rough from the start."

"This bunny kicks hard," she smirked at me instead of explaining further.

"No shit," I snarked as I righted myself, stood back up, and stretched.

I was dirty but completely uninjured.

I didn't have any sort of healing factor like in the comics.

I just had Miracles and infinite power to fuel them.

Baring Artoria with Avalon, I was hands down the toughest of the Family.

"Good, good," she nodded at my posture change as I readied myself for the fight of my life.

Or my hips.

I'd see how it goes.

"See how this bunny gets serious," Scathach cried as she lunged at me. "Hop."

"That is violently adorable," I deadpanned once more as she lunged at me with her 'war cry'.

As cute as she was, the Celt's fist moved with enough speed that it could have taken off my head if I didn't dodge out of the way.

I tilted my head as I spun, the dislocated air from her fist blowing my hair back. I grabbed her outstretched arm in the same fluid motion and flung her over my shoulder to the ground.

"Toh," she grunted as her back hit the earth. Hard.

"The bunny may kick hard," I said, leaning over her prone form. "But it's wabbit season. Hehehehe." I did my best Elmer Fud as I allowed her to rise to her feet.

"Hehe… I'm going to enjoy this." Scathach's smile was euphoric as she stared at me, but her eyes were searching. Hungry. Violent.

"Hop to it then," I smirked, my gaze just as hungry.

I was a coward. There were no two ways about it. I liked to set things up to my advantage as much as possible.

But, as a product of my centuries of fighting and conflict, I had learned to love a good fight. Maybe not to the same degree as Scathach, but I still found joy in the bloodshed and the violence.

The careful positioning of Ornstein and Smough.

The long moments of inactivity are followed by the clash of blades with Sir Alonne.

The sheer breadth of skills Gael had accumulated for millennium.

The mind-numbing exhaustion of days besieging Radahn.

With no books, only rare conversations, and no other form of entertainment, my mind had adapted.

The clash of blades, spells, fists, and wits was my only stimulation for centuries.

I found joy in it.

One just needed to ask Ranni or Melina how I acted in the Lands Between. Knowing I would return from any death, I had gotten a bit… wild.

"Hop," Scathach said, hopping forward to blast me with a flurry of punches and kicks.

More than that.

I.

Got.

Good.

No longer caught by surprise, I stood with my feet firmly planted as I blocked, parried, deflected, or weaved.

Scathach was faster than me and physically stronger as well.

Servants were bullshit like that.

But every blow she landed was healed in an eye blink.

So long as I was not defeated decisively in one blow, I would never lose.

It was a shame that comic worlds were full of people who could do that.

Ironically, I was Hoarah Loux in this situation. Scathach played the role of my past self, hopping, kicking, punching, and trying to wear me down while I turtled up and waited for an opening.

“Come on, come on!” Scathach cried, her voice brimming with wild joy as she leaped over my head to try and kick my back. I couldn’t dodge, so I hardened my flesh with pyromancy. My feet remained planted thanks to Beast Claws piercing the floor.

Her foot met my spine with the strength to shatter mountains.

I stood unmoving.

But this blow triggered my trap, and the incantation activated.

A blast of golden light burst from me in a torrent.

“Wah!” Scathach yelped as the Law of Causality blasted her away and into the cliffside.

Yoruichi was faster than me.

Raven was now just as powerful as I.

Scathach was more skilled.

Artoria was tougher.

Ranni was a genuine Goddess with Authority to match her status.

Diana was all around a monster.

Thinking I could defeat any of them while wearing my meat suit was a folly of the highest order.

Even now, Scathach only moved at a fraction of her top speed.

In a strait on fight with most of my Family, I would lose. Badly.

In a battle to the death?

I was undefeatable.

Because I cheated.

I chased after my wife as she flew through the air. I was there to give her what she wanted when she crashed.

I kissed her. Roughly. Passionately.

Then I dodged a blood-red spear ready to pierce my throat.

Another spear fell from the sky to impale the spot I had just vacated.

Then another.

And another.

Dozens of spears rained down on me, every one of them aiming to take my life.

I dodged, wove, and flipped away from the prone Celt as she rose to her feet, twin

spears in her hands.

“I’ve played around too much,” Scathach smirked, knees bending. “It is time I fulfilled my promise.” Her eyes were alight with lust and battle lust.

“Any chance I can convince you to let me grab a mattress?” I asked as I conjured the Dancer’s Twinblades to my hand. I didn’t bother with armour. Against Scathach, it would only slow me down. “I’m worried about chafing.”

“No. Show this bunny your strength!” Midspeach, she lunged. Twice as fast as before, I barely had time to deflect the spears as they lanced for my chest. They whirled, spinning blades of death, thirsty for my blood.

The following few seconds were a blur as our weapons clashed hundreds of times. Her weapons were everywhere, searching and probing the slightest opening. She fought in a zig-zag of starts and stops, abrupt shifts in momentum meant to disrupt and disorient lesser opponents.

Every twelve blows of hers were met with one of mine.

I had chosen my weapons just for this.

The fluid, curved nature of the two swords fitted this type of defensive battle perfectly. Like a stream flowing down a mountain, my blades moved in a steady but intractable rhythm as they deflected every one of her thrusts.

In five seconds of clashing, I had received hundreds of tiny wounds along my arms and legs but no real damage to my torso or head. Every wound closed as soon as it opened.

And I was gaining speed.

My ‘one move’, my dance of blades, the constant and uninterrupted flow of my swords, was gaining more and more momentum.

I was pulling her in, sacrificing pointless wounds for decisive advantage.

The Queen of the Land of Shadows knew it too.

So she changed the dynamic.

“Bunny Strike!” She cried, jumping backwards and forwards again, gaining momentum as she descended on me from above.

Man, she was having way too much fun with this.

My blades met her spears again, deflecting them to the sides as they continued their dance.

That was my mistake.

Scathach released her spears, the loss of opposing force enough to stagger me for less than an instant.

It was enough.

She landed at my feet and thrust upward with two new spears.

The barbed weapons pierced my unprotected stomach, bursting out of my back in a shower of blood.

The strength of her blow lifted me from my feet and slammed me into the ground, spears pinning me in place.

Well used to pain as I was, I barely felt their presence as more than an inconvenience to my movement.

In a move that would have made any stripper jealous, she twirled on her spear and landed groin first on my face.

Her leotard was soaking.

“This is what happens when you attack a cute, innocent bunny,” Scathach declared as she reached down and pulled her bodysuit to the side, exposing her weeping slit. Her nylons were still in the way, but my teeth tore through them quickly. “I shall introduce you to the friendship of the thighs.”

I mumbled something along the lines of it being the guy’s job to do the impaling, but she ground her naked cunt along my face, and I got to work.

Digging in, I licked, sucked, probed and consumed the incredible snatch.

My hands were not idle, caressing along her incredible, nylon-clad legs before coming to rest at the stupendous ass above my head.

“Rubbing a bunny’s foot is good luck. Hop,” Scathach said, bouncing her ass for me, though making my tongue work more difficult. “Luck is important, you know? Hop hop.”

On her last ‘hop’, my hand smacked her ass, stopping her bouncing and allowing me to work in peace.

You don’t interrupt Beethoven when he is composing!

“Ah,” Scacthach gasped as I lightly grazed her clit with my teeth. “Mmm, hop… no, never mind.” She made to bounce once more, but my hand crashed into her jiggling cheeks.

As she shivered and shuddered under the work of my tongue, she took the time to lean forward.

Not to pull the spears from my gut but to tear my shirt from my body.

What did my wives have against my awful shirts?

I kept making her hum and groan as she reached down further and annihilated my shorts and underwear, leaving me nude.

I’d have made a joke about my ‘spear’, but my mouth was otherwise occupied.

I didn’t mind performing cunnilingus. In fact, I even enjoyed it, but being trapped and submissive was a turnoff.

It was time to switch things up.

Like all my greatest victories, success would come from the element of surprise.

“Mmmmmnnnnn,” Scathach groaned as my tongue extended to her G-spot as I released the tiniest bit of control of my human form to extend the appendage.

That was the distraction.

My actual attack was my hand, wiggling under her bodysuit and tearing another hole in the nylons.

“Ahhh,” Scathach came with a cry as my thumb breached her defenceless ass.

The vice-like grip her thighs held on my head loosened.

One hand tore the spears out of my gut in a spray of blood, but the wounds healed instantly.

The other wrapped around the queen, holding her in place as I rose.

“Grrrh.” I slammed the dazed Celt against a tree, pinning her for long enough for me to wrap my arms under her thighs, behind her shoulders, and meeting to clasp behind her head.

In less than a second, I went from pinned to the ground to trapping Scathach in a full nelson.

“Bunnys don’t talk,” I growled in her ear as I lined myself up. “They breed!”

I impaled her.

“Grk!” She grunted as my cock speared her.

“Hop,” I said sarcastically, bouncing her on my dick. “Hop. Hop.” I slammed my hips forward with every hop, carving deeper into her core.

This position was suboptimal for depth, speed, or positioning and was almost impossible to do with only human limits without injuring one party or the other.

It was perfect for controlling an uppity bunny.

I gritted my teeth as I carried her forward, every movement accompanied by another bounce. Concentrating on the rhythm was difficult enough when I was just fucking her, but the Celt was easily the most experienced woman in my Family when it came to sexual matters. Even if her body was locked in place, her velvet walls’ undulation, contractions, and grip were working overtime to milk an orgasm out of me.

All while she fought to free herself.

I could contend with her B-rank strength, one thousand times the peak of humanity, thanks to my magic and the leverage I held over her.

Focusing on holding her down, along with everything else, was exhausting.

To distract her, I slammed my wife into a nearby tree head first.

“Ugh!” Scathach grunted, her breasts finally bouncing free from her leotard after a violent thrust pushed her along the tree’s rough bark. “You fool! My outfit!”

“Don’t worry about it,” I barked, teeth gritted as her muscles flexed and fought for freedom. “Medea doesn’t do shoddy work.”

“Hah, hah,” she panted. Pressing her against the tree allowed me to speed up, her cotton tail tickling my waist as I pounded her. “Urk.” Whenever I thought she was getting too comfortable, I slammed her into the tree again.

Scathach loved this.

The fight.

The violence.

The display of power and strength.

The pain did nothing to her but egg her on, fighting for purchase and position.

She wasn’t masochistic or sadistic.

She just loved the battle.

“AHHHHHH!” CRACK!

Scathach screamed her second orgasm as I slammed her hard enough against the tree to shatter its trunk.

“RAAGH!” The tree fell away as I road my release, slamming into her, unloading shot after shot of boiling cum deep in the bunny’s hungry cunt.

I should have been more careful. I had trapped the lancer’s arms and legs but not her hands.

Scathach was no blushing virgin, no submissive woman, and not one to lose easily.

Even as I rode my orgasm and she was still in the throes of hers, the Queen of the Land of Shadows was launching her next offensive.

“Watch this bunny’s runes!” Scathach declared, her insides still quivering from her orgasm as she carved a glowing rune in the air.

The wood of the fallen tree sprung to life, winding like snakes to bind my feet and crawl up my body.

Shuddering and still cumming, I could not stop the wood from yanking me to the ground, winding around my arms to free the Celt from my hold.

Scathach rode me to the ground, my dick never leaving the warm, wet embrace of her cunt.

It was seamless and effortless.

This woman had taught Cu Chullain runes well enough that he could qualify as a Caster class servant.

“The bunny knows all,” she smirked down at me challengingly. “You have a long way to come before you’re worthy to defeat this bunny… Hooop.” She bounced, slow and sensually, along my still-sensitive dick. Her freed breasts wobbled in time with the fake

ears on her head.

It was a sight to set one's lust aflame.

My mind went cold.

While I wasn't the least bit submissive, I didn't need to be completely dominant in bed. Mutual pleasure or a back-and-forth was fine for me as well.

Getting smothered by thick thighs while giving oral sounded like a great time in bed.

Cowgirl riding me? Yes, please.

But being tied up? Bound? Trapped?

I fought down nausea.

This was the difference between Diana and me.

The sight before me was one of the hottest things I could imagine. A bunny girl Scathach was hopping on my dick like a pogo stick. Her every bounce getting harder and faster.

Soon she really would break my hips.

It was only Sticky Fingers that prevented me from softening inside of her core.

Blood-red eyes stared down at me.

"Hop."

Knowingly.

"Hop."

Challengingly.

"Hop."

The bunny knows all.

"Hooooop…"

In a surge, I Freed myself from my cage of wood, sitting upward and slamming my head against hers in a brutal headbutt.

"I told you," I growled, one hand grabbing her long hair and yanking her head back.

"Ah!" She gasped as I mauled her left breast roughly, teeth biting down on her engorged nipple.

I had been going easy on her.

She didn't want that.

Fine.

Time to break her.

In my meat suit, I would lose 10 out of 10 times against Scathach in a battle.

I trailed my tongue along her breasts, lighting up every inch of skin I touched with pleasure and pain. Her nerves were on fire as my tongue and dick branded themselves deep into her mind.

“AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!” Scathach screamed her third orgasm of the day.

And screamed.

And screamed.

After three minutes of stimulation, I withdrew my tongue from her skin but kept myself sheathed in her spasming and twitching cunt.

“I told you,” I repeated as blood-red eyes stared up at me vacantly.

Drool dribbled out the corner of her mouth.

Her breasts rose and fell rapidly as she desperately gasped for breath.

“Bunnys don’t talk. They breed!”

Her eyes refocused, alight with joy and challenge.

Her mouth curved into a taunting smirk.

“Then breed this bunny.”

Scathach screamed again.

Even if I might lose to her in battle.

In bed, I was undefeatable.

I might never be able to give Scathach the death she wanted, but I could kill her in other ways.

Author's Note:

Fun fact, most of Schatach's dialogue in this chapter is her cannon dialogue in her Piercing Bunny outfit.

God, do I love FGO.

This will be the last smut chapter for a while. Next week we'll be back to your regular scheduled chapters. I had planned one more initially, but then I got sick and then wrote the 7k monster, so I'll save the fourth one I had planned for later.

I am so hyped for what is to come.

Part 3 will be different than the first two parts, but it will be absolutely necessary to set up the end of Volume 2 and the entirety of Volume 3.

I'll see you all next week for Probation 1.

Probation

PROBATION I

I heard from God today and She sounded just like me
What have I done, and who have I become?
I saw the devil today and he looked a lot like me
I looked away, I turned away
Arms wide open
I stand alone
I'm no hero and I'm not made of stone
Right or wrong
I can hardly tell
I'm on the wrong side of Heaven and the righteous side of hell
The wrong side of Heaven and the righteous side
The righteous side of hell

"Before we begin," Lois Lane said to me, a sombre look in her dark eyes. "I want to thank you for saving Superman and the other heroes. For a time, I feared we would lose them."

"No problem," I replied with a knowing smile. "It was my wives who stepped in anyway."

"Still," the famous reporter insisted, her eyes just as knowing as mine. We were being vague due to the other people in the room, but I could feel the sincerity radiating off of her. "I know I feel safer knowing they are still with us."

"As I said," I smiled my most charming smile. "It was no issue. I am happy to help. I am also glad the misunderstanding with my landing has largely passed. My Family and the inhabitants of this world are striving to gain trust in each other. It has gone well so far, and I hope this little program will aid that effort." The cameras weren't rolling yet, but it didn't hurt to build a foundation. "By the way, congratulations."

"Sorry?"

"On the pregnancy," I said with a smile at her question. She froze, her eyes wide. "A daughter. You and your husband must be very happy."

"We are," usually mild-mannered Clark Kent interrupted. "How did you know? We haven't announced it."

"A perk of being me," I smiled mysteriously, waving my hands vaguely mystically. "I know all. Woooo."

Lois relaxed slightly at the joke, defusing the tense air that had risen from my 'threat'. I hadn't meant it as one, but I could see why she thought it might be.

The camera crew and tech aids took this chance to congratulate their coworkers, along with more than a bit of ribbing of Clark.

Apparently, it was an ongoing joke around the Daily Planet that plain ol' Clark Kent had taken years to work up the nerve to ask out his childhood friend and crush.

"If you don't mind me asking," I said to Lois quietly while one man loudly proclaimed he 'taught Clark everything he knows.' "I thought I was to be interviewed by Jimmy Olsen. I'm not opposed to the change. Just curious as to why the sudden shift?"

"He's on assignment," the intrepid reporter observed my movements in case I took offence to being 'stood up'. "I was available to cover him, and he was the closest to the incident."

"What happened?" I asked, more for politeness' sake than actual interest. This was all theatre to me anyway. It didn't matter who was actually asking the questions. Now that I thought about it, Lois might be a better fit since I saved her husband a week ago.

"A few prisoners have disappeared from the Birdcage's feed," Lois whispered conspiratorially, leaning forward in her chair. I leaned in as well. "Hasn't been made public, and no one knows if they've escaped or not, but it has the brass buzzing like flies."

"Anyone I should know about?" I asked, now actually curious. "I'm sure you have some… inside sources."

In this world, lacking the Endbringer Truce, thus the need to keep prisoners alive as fodder, the Birdcage was used to house the superpowered prisoners that couldn't be killed for one reason or another that had earned a Kill Order. It ran differently than in the novel, with each cell tailored to its occupant rather than acting as a loose prison yard.

It was a hole they could throw people in and forget about, secure in the knowledge that they would never see the light of day. It had operated for decades without a loss or breakout.

Until now.

"Nothing official," Lois gave me the stink eye at my look towards her husband. "Just a few names, Gavel, Swamp Thing… The Faerie Queen."

I raised a brow.

Those were some big names.

Gavel was just a big thug, but one whose defences were strong enough to stand up to Zion in the original Worm for several minutes. While I wouldn't put him at Superman's or Wonder Woman's level of toughness, he was still durable enough that executing him was almost impossible.

Swamp Thing, an anti-hero in most continuities, had gone berserk for some reason decades ago. He had a stronger form of chlorokinesis than even Poison Ivy and was immortal so long as he retained his connection to The Green. The burgeoning hero community at the time had fought desperately to contain him. He was one of the earliest

prisoners of the Birdcage and had been one of the reasons it had been built in the first place.

The Faerie Queen was…

Quite frankly, she was the boogeyman of every Super in the world.

In the original Worm, Glaistig Uaine could collect imprints of parahumans, killing them, or from those already dead. She would then use the power as a shadow of its former user. In the book, she could use two or three reliably, more if she was willing to sacrifice power for numbers.

A useful and powerful ability, but in this world, that would have only put her in the A-lister classification at most. In a comic world, where most powers are not from Shards and whose heavy hitters way out-scaled her, she would have been a memorable, if limited, villain.

That was if the Faerie Queen's powers were the same as in the book.

They weren't.

She wasn't limited to shard bearers. Mutants or other supers were just as susceptible to her ability. Possibly regular humans as well, but she had shown no desire to harvest them.

She summoned tens of dead as easily as breathing. Most of her army was low-level villains, rogues, or heroes. C and D-listers. But, with over forty known kills to her name, even A-listers could and had fallen to her.

If that wasn't terrifying enough, she was also immortal. There was footage of her head and chest vaporizing and regenerating.

I had no idea why Ciara, the woman known as Glaistig Uaine as a villain and later Valkyrie as a hero, acted the way she did. In the book, she essentially 'talked' to shards, driving her to a special kind of madness, but she had never been outright malicious.

Like all potential threats, I had investigated her upon my landing. She had remained almost entirely unknown as a super for most of her life. Flying under the radar and using her powers subtly and infrequently for decades.

A rumour of a 'super using other supers'.

A ghostly figure, but one that didn't stir any waves.

Then, at some point after Behemoth first appeared, she snapped.

Putting Glaistig Uaine behind bars had been the first significant victory for the Justice League, cementing their status as the greatest heroes in the world. She had been an Endbringer in all but body count, and even then, only because she targeted supers exclusively.

No complex moral quandary like in the New Wave incident. She was a villain, and

they were heroes. As simple as that.

Between the start of her rampage in Los Angles and its conclusion in the outskirts of Gotham, an estimated three percent of all Supers on Earth had fallen to her growing shadow army.

I could see why it was being kept hush-hush that she was AWOL.

If the public thought that Glaistig Uaine was on the loose, the panic would be insane to deal with.

“Thanks for the info,” I nodded, recognizing an olive branch when I saw one. “If I hear anything, I’ll let you know, and you can pass it on to your… sources.” I gave an exaggerated wink as I sat back in my chair.

Lois Lane nodded, sitting back as well before calling out to the half dozen men joking and chatting with her husband.

“Boys!” She shouted, making them jump. “Let’s get the camera rolling. You’re making the Elden Lord wait.”

More than one of them looked at me, terror on their face.

I smile guilelessly.

Judging by his quick exit and awkward walk, I think one of them shit himself.

I chuckled.

The others quickly regained their positions at the cameras, lights, and microphones.

“We’re on in three. Two. One. -”

“Elden Lord. World Conquerer. Dragon. Necromancer. Polygynist. The public is crying for answers. Who are you? Why are you here? Are you a hero? Who is Mikael?” Lois dived right in, not wasting any time on useless introductions. An actual intro would be filmed by their crew later.

“I am here to answer all those questions and more,” I replied with a charming smile. “I’m afraid I’ll have to summarize, though. Tens of millions of years don’t fit into an hour-long program easily.” The reporter didn’t even blink at the length of time.

She had seen some shit.

“Why don’t you start with your youth, then?”

“Depending on your definition, I am still quite young,” I replied. We started with some easy questions and playful banter. “I am unique in nature, but those closest to me biologically are all older than this universe. Compared to them, I am just an infant.”

“That is… disturbing,” Lois replied slowly. “Should we be worried about these other dragons?”

“They wouldn’t be dragons, each a different being with different morphology, but you don’t have to worry,” I waived off. “They are in different realities entirely and have no

way of getting here. Even if they did, they are primarily sympathetic to mortals."

"You said you are different from them? In what way? Because you are younger?" Lois pressed.

"Essentially, yes," I nodded before starting the real reason I was here. "Unlike them, I was not born strong. I was mortal. Weak. Weaker than the humans of this planet, in fact."

I noticed her eyes widening and saw them flicker to her disguised husband. The rest of the room's occupants shuffled uncomfortably, realizing things were going off script.

Like most interviews in this fashion, I had presented with questions I would be asked, and I was able to approve or reject them. Shows like this could not survive if they could not get people to come on them.

No one wanted to look like a fool.

So news agencies compromised. The guest came on, explained their side of the current issue, and got some publicity. The reporters got the chance to ask questions in a one-on-one context. Things veering off course was common enough, but only to the extent of digression, not a complete shift in the script.

Lois Lane, a world-famous investigative journalist, rarely hosted things like this. She was well known for not pulling punches, asking tough questions, and being the type of bloodhound reporter dedicated to finding the truth, no matter the risk.

She offended more people in power on a weakly basis than even me, and I was actively trying to push buttons.

She was only here because the Daily Planet didn't want to risk me going to another news outlet for an interview. With Olsen occupied, they hoped a big name like Lois Lane would draw me back. A basic, if practical political move to asway the large egos that usually came on shows like this.

She was also on her best behaviour, sticking to the approved questions and catering to my earlier requests. Part of it was because I differed from the usual politician or corrupt CEO. I was a confirmed killer, incredibly powerful, and had a massive support following after the Simurgh, Doomsday, and Trigon. Part of it was that she did have some goodwill toward me for saving her husband's life.

If I had stayed on script, this little interview would have ended with a flattering, if slightly dull, article on 'Your Friendly Neighbourhood Elden Lord.'

The Daily Planet's narrative would have worked if I was a new hero looking to establish myself as reliable, trustworthy, and humane.

I wasn't.

The narrative I wanted was completely different.

Heroes were bound by specific codes of conduct, rules and laws that needed to be

followed. I would face a massive backlash if I had that reputation and acted differently from the narrative later.

I had brutally murdered five people on camera and gotten away with it for two reasons. First, their actions were enough that no judge would have tried to defend the Sons of Trigon. Second, people were still downright terrified of me.

They wouldn't be scared of 'Your Friendly Neighbourhood Elden Lord'.

Medea had put it well. Humans need heroes to fight monsters. Heroes need to fight monsters. Monsters need humans to prey upon.

But heroes are thrown down by the humans that raise them up.

Monsters attract heroes like flies to honey.

And humans are helpless before monsters.

I didn't want to be any of those.

I was going to be all three.

Human enough to evoke sympathy and support. Heroic enough that the mortals needed me to fight monsters. And monstrous enough that I wasn't bound by any rules but those I chose to follow.

I hoped my 'explanation' with the heroes over Doomsday's body would cover this.

Keep them vague. Keep them guessing.

Then I discovered Wonder Woman was gaining a bunch of Insight that I couldn't control.

So here I was, doing damage control using the 'truth', which Insight would confirm is the truth.

God, was I tired of this shit.

I had so much shit to do. I needed to practice with Haki and Aura, cuddle my cat(?), discover what my semblance is, cuddle my wives, fly some more, fuck my wives, read through my library, fuck my wives some more, play video games, and tour the world.

Why can't I be the big bad Dragon? I just want to fuck with people, is that too much to ask?

Still, it wasn't like I wasn't good at what I did.

Like a shark in the water, Lois Lane leapt at the bloody bait I laid for her.

"What do you mean by mortal?" She asked, leaning forward hungrily. She was more than willing to go off script if it meant getting a story she wanted.

"Exactly that," I nodded. Without the genetic manipulation of beings like the Celestials, I hadn't been kidding that I had been weaker than most of the humans on this planet. "You could call me human if it makes things easier. It's not the same, but there is enough overlap with the humans of this world that the differences are academic. It is one

of the reasons I was searching for a way to gain a human body and why my standard of beauty is similar to many people's today." Little tidbits I am sure the super geniuses of the world already discovered.

"Were you born on Earth? A few supers are well known to have lived for thousands of years or have the ability to shapeshift."

"No. It was earth-like, but there were some major differences. We had a lower technological base, were biologically weaker, and had no supers. Not villains or heroes."

"I'm sure quite a few people would love to know about what a world without supers was like, but we don't have time for that. Tell us what happened. How did you go from a world with no powers to who you are now?"

I could imagine anyone watching this leaning forward eagerly, wanting to know the source of my power and any weaknesses.

"I should warn you, and any viewers watching, that the story is not a nice one," I said somberly. "I will do a lot of summarizing and gloss over a bit to save time, but what remains will still be disturbing. Anyone with a weak stomach should turn away."

"We shall display the appropriate warnings," Lois said seriously. She didn't even flinch. This woman had been to warzones and massacres and seen the worst humanity had to offer. She wouldn't be scared away easily.

Perfect.

"As I said, I was mortal once," I started weaving my tale. My Performance Talent might not be as directly useful as Martial or Magic Talent, but I would put it to good use. "I had a family. Friends. People I loved and who loved me. But I was taken from them. I awoke one day in a stone prison. Locked away in a cell no bigger than a cubicle and left to rot. I stayed there for months. Alone. I received no food. No water. There was no one to talk to, and I had no idea what I had done to deserve such a fate."

"How did you survive?" Lois asked, entranced. I wasn't using Dragon Aura, but I didn't need to.

"I didn't," I answered sombrely. "My first death came while I was in that cell. Starving and dehydrated, a husk of the man I once was."

"That's…" Lois furrowed her brow, trying to understand what I was getting at.

"I hadn't realized until then that I had been cursed," I explained. "I was undead. Cursed to never find joy in life nor peace in death. Any time I died, I simply returned. Still trapped in that cell. For eternity."

"You escaped? Or were you released?"

"After many months of struggle, I managed to escape my cell by shoving my limbs, one at a time, through the bars and reforming on the other side once I perished from the

blood loss."

I heard one of the cameramen retch at the image I was painting.

Good.

I firmly believed in moving on from painful memories. Of growing stronger from opposition.

It was why I allowed Yoruichi to keep Ordering me, despite it tickling my trauma. My self-inflicted training regime.

It wasn't for everyone, but I would endure the discomfort if it meant overcoming my trauma.

My 'story' was just another weapon in my toolbox. It not only gave me sympathy from those who heard it, but it also acted as a shield. I placed a sword at any opponent's neck by showing 'vulnerability'.

Even if someone could theoretically kill my Family or me, what happens when I return?

From there, I would resurrect the rest, and all you'd have accomplished was to make a very powerful and immortal Family mad at you.

Nobody knew that my main body was my weakness. Nobody knew I couldn't revive my wives like I could others. I was turning the cluster-fuck that was Glory Girl's resurrection into 'proof' that my Family was unstoppable.

This interview was to be my magnum opus.

This wasn't me reacting or doing things for my wives. This was something I had set up and would achieve all by myself. A week in the making since I had talked to Wonder Woman in the wake of the Doomsday incident.

After this, I can stop this constant politicking.

I enjoyed the process and was good at it, but I did not want to worry about it for the rest of my time here. I'd still do it for shits and giggles occasionally, as well as to support the others, but after this, the narrative would be firmly set.

I had my body for two weeks now, a month and a half since I had landed on Earth, and I was ready to retire.

I wanted to spend my days reading, flying, playing games, trolling the people of this world, being a degenerate with my wives, and enjoying my happily ever after.

The simple truth was that most things did not need my attention.

I'd never be left entirely alone, but this interview will be the final touch on cementing my public image.

"I resurrected outside my cell in a new world. One filled with undead, demons, dragons, and decrepit gods. All crawling toward a slow but inevitable apocalypse. I was

naked. Powerless. Alone. With no skills and no clue as to what was going on."

"What happened?"

"I died. A lot." The other occupants of the room flinched. I was smiling, but it was not a happy smile. "I was bludgeoned to death. Decapitated. Burned. Impaled. Crushed. Eaten alive. Torn apart. I had never held a weapon, had no fighting experience, and was outnumbered thousands to one. That was not counting the demons that roamed the halls. Monstrosities three stories tall that killed anything that approached. That was how I spent my first month out of the cell as I tried to leave the Undead Asylum. It took one month to leave a building, even a large one. The rest of my journey was not any easier."

My tale wove together effortlessly for the next few minutes, entrapping the listeners in my weaving.

I uttered not a single lie, simply omitting a few details.

I spoke nothing of the Catalogue or that my wives were part of the tale.

I chose to do this because there was no better lie than the truth. I was sure the super geniuses of the world had already pieced together vast swaths of information about my Family and me, and I had no way of knowing what Insight had given the local version of Diana.

By controlling the narrative, I could contextualize everything to my desire.

"It was there I met Priscilla," I narrated. I had gotten her permission to explain the bare basics of her situation. In return, I had made her a promise. "Locked away in a magic painting because of fear and discrimination. A peaceful woman who wanted nothing to do with all the blood, violence, and death of the outside world. If you have watched her streams, you will know she loves music. It was my solace wandering the world alone, and it drew her to me. We sing together frequently, even today. I hope to soon be able to sing with her on stage and share our joy with the world."

A little promotion for her burgeoning career.

I saw one cameraman pump his fist in joy.

She might be more popular than I thought if she is already that recognizable after only streaming for a little over a week.

"That is lovely," Lois chimed in. "So Priscilla was your first love? How did the others come into the picture? Was she accepting of your other wives?"

"We will get to that story soon. Unfortunately," I sighed, looking into the distance as if lost in bittersweet memories. "Our time together was limited. I was still undead. The world was still coming to an end. The Fires of the First Flame were still fading. If I chose to stay with her, we might have had a few decades or centuries of happiness before the end. I didn't want that. With a heavy heart, I took up my weapons again and continued my

journey. I found a safe place for her while I did what I could for that world."

I paused in my story when I saw a few eyes misting up in the room. Superman himself was red-eyed.

It was almost physically painful not to make a laser vision joke.

It made sense.

Not only was I a supernaturally good storyteller, but my story contained hints of classics like Rapunzel and Beauty and the Beast, and carried a note of doomed heroism that resonated powerfully with people who lived in this world.

Everyone loved a good romance, even the most stone-hearted, but a doomed romance was even more enticing.

Despite being a parody of teenage love, Romeo and Juliet would not have resounded through the ages so well if that weren't true.

Still…

Did they forget that this story had a happy ending?

"That is the world Medea was talking about," Lois said, furtively wiping her eyes. It took a moment for me to remember what she was talking about.

The Great Betrayal.

When Ranni, Melina, Medea and, most damning of all, Artoria turned on me.

I still had to get them back for that.

"Ah…" I started to deny it on instinct.

Then I paused and swallowed my words bitterly.

Like it or not, and I definitely didn't, their 'testimony' would only help me form my narrative.

"She said you burned for thousands of years to keep others alive. That always struck me as odd," Lois pressed. "You make no secret that you do not wish to be a hero despite how many people you have saved. Even immortal, burning for thousands of years would not have been a pleasant experience. You didn't sacrifice yourself for a world or civilization. You did it for love! So your wife could live!"

No, I didn't! Don't make my Tragic Backstory (TM) into a shitty Young Adult Romance Tragedy (Definity not TM).

"There were others I was close to, and for myself, since it was the only way to end the curse," I insisted. I couldn't say I was doing it for my Freedom or that I rescued Priscilla as an experiment, but I could still deflect. "A handful of people I had managed to save. Less than ten in a kingdom that once housed hundreds of millions. And I had no idea I would burn for that long."

I didn't like the look in her eyes. I knew that look. It was the look of a fanfiction fan

who was gushing about their OTP.

Thankfully, Lois Lane didn't disappoint me. Even lost in the 'romance' of it all, she didn't forget what she was here for.

"Hem," she coughed slightly into her fist, refocusing on me with a set face. "While the story is fascinating and romantic, I notice you are skipping a lot and being intentionally vague. What are you trying to hide?"

"In my defence, this story took place over decades, and we are just starting. Being light on details is a necessity. Still, you are right. I was trying to hide things, though not for my sake." I nodded agreeably, thankful she had taken my bait.

"For your family, then," the reporter nodded.

"Yes," I answered. "And I will continue to do so. Their secrets are their own. If they wish to share, they will. All I will say is that the place I managed to hide Priscilla is the Island I carried to this world. A separate dimension that the rest of my Family called home. I couldn't not go there myself, but I could send her to them."

"Why were they there?"

"I won't say," I shook my head firmly. "I don't really have a concern about privacy for myself and am an open book. What you see is what you get. But those are my beliefs, not theirs. I respect them enough that I will not spill their secrets."

"Very well," Lois nodded. I could detect a hint of respect in the action even if I knew it must rankle her news senses to have secrets dangled before her. "But that is how you met them, correct?"

"In a way," I agreed. "I could not go to the Island myself, nor could they leave initially, but we could communicate."

"And you fell in love," Lois said decisively.

"Not even close," I disagreed. For a second, I delighted at their confused face before explaining. This portion of the story was a bit more than I would have liked to explain, but it was necessary to alleviate the concerns that I was Mastering my wives. "You must understand that I was still undead. Still in a world spiralling toward its destruction. I still had no idea what had led me to that place in the first place. I had no plans to fall in love. In fact, I actively resisted any sort of romantic overtures from them. While not unfamiliar with polygamy, my original society was still largely monogamous. I had no intentions of creating a 'harem', as some people are calling my Family."

"What changed?"

"Time," I said simply. "Time, sincerity, and support. It is hard to remain aloof when given love, care, and support. I was particularly stubborn, though, so I managed to hold off for centuries as I travelled to more worlds. Only after Melina died did I realize how

important they all were to me. That was before I learned how to resurrect people, so I believed I had lost her forever. It led to me reexamining all my relationships."

All true, yet so out of context that people would draw the utterly wrong conclusion.

"Your ability to bring back the dead," Lois pounced. "Can you expound on it? The confirmation of the existence of the afterlife. Of the soul. It has stirred up a major hornet's nest, and our readers and viewers are dying to know more."

"Good one," I chuckled at the pun. Confusion rolled across her face instantly before her eyes twitched in annoyance. "We've already digressed so much to talk about my love life that I don't want to waste too much time on this. Still, I can give the highlights."

"It would ease many minds if they knew what was happening."

"First, I will say something plainly to everyone who watches this. I will not be resurrecting anyone else. Period."

"Why?" The reporter didn't look judgemental, just curious. "While I am happy for Glory Girl's return, what separates her from all the other heroes who have died. What about civilians? Are there restrictions on how many people you can bring back?"

"I could, theoretically, bring back as many people as I wanted."

"Then why just her?"

"Let me ask you a question in reverse," I replied airily. "Would people be happy if I brought back everyone I wanted? If the dead walked the street with the living, immortal and unaging? More powerful than they were in life? If I was Glaistig Uaine 2.0. The Faerie King. Would people feel safer then?"

"No, they would not." The grim set in her mouth told me Lois was seriously considering the idea.

She wasn't the only one.

Most of the crew in the room was shuffling awkwardly.

"That's one of the reasons," I nodded. "There are a few others. Firstly, if you have watched the video of Glory Girl's resurrection, you will know that I believed resurrection to be common at the time. And, after hearing my tale of my time as an undead, can you blame me? I had no idea it would be such an issue to the people of this world."

It was an absurd truth but a truth nonetheless.

Comic worlds had more death and resurrection than even Dark Souls.

"I suppose not."

"As for why Glory Girl, in particular, that reason is twofold. First, I needed a human body, and Panacea is still the best biokinetic in the world. With my abilities, I knew she wasn't dead. The trade for her services was natural. Second, I received Glory Girl's permission before contacting her sister. Notice how I did not bring back her parents? That

is because they didn't want to come back."

"They didn't?" The reporter looked surprised at my words before narrowing her eyes, looking for any signs of deceit. "I find it hard to believe someone would want to stay dead."

"That is the arrogance of the living," I nodded. "They assume death is terrible. That coming back to life would be a good thing. It isn't. Take it from someone who knows what he is speaking of. Life is a struggle. It is pain. Heartbreak. Loss. When someone dies, it is not the dead that are the victim. It is the living they leave behind. The dead are at peace. Beyond pain and sorrow. Being able to die can be a person's greatest gift."

"…My apologies," Lois Lane said softly, looking genuinely regretful for her words as she remembered that I had been denied that gift for the longest time. But she pressed on. If that was enough to stop her curiosity, she wouldn't be who she was. Her eyes narrowed accusingly. "You make it sound like you are advocating suicide. That we should all just die."

"I'm really not." I shook my head emphatically. "The dead are at peace, sure, but that is all they are. The dead cannot build or destroy. They might not feel pain but nor do they experience the joys of life. What they are is all they will ever be. Never able to grow. Never able to improve their lot or the world around them. We must live. For ourselves. For others that came before or will come after. Life is a struggle but a necessary and beautiful one."

I wasn't speaking out of my ass, nor was my opinion formed from my Life Element.

I had faced grief. Pain. Depression. For centuries my existence had been an existential nightmare as I battled fear that 'I' was being controlled, puppeted by women claiming to love me.

Despite that, in my entire time, from waking in that cell to this second, the only time I had been suicidal had been while I burned in the Fires of the First Flame.

Don't you dare go hollow.

Even after all these years and all the pain those words had caused me, I still thought those words and what they represented were beautiful.

"I didn't take you for a philosopher."

"Anyone who lives long enough becomes one," I said genially. "Old age does that to people."

"You called yourself an infant earlier," Lois reminded before getting back on track. "Before we return to your tale, do you mind explaining the nature of the afterlife? Baring your ability to resurrect people is what most concern the populous."

"The short answer to if there is an afterlife: Yes. The slightly longer answer is that

there is a ‘catch-all’ afterlife where the vast majority of anything with a soul ends up. It’s not some sort of paradise or a different place, just a layer of reality most can’t perceive where souls reside once they lose their physical anchors. I.E., Their bodies.”

“So you are claiming religious afterlives don’t exist?” Lois asked with a frown.

“Eh,” I said, waiving my hand in a so-so gesture. “As I said, that is where most souls end up. Any being of sufficient power that can interact with souls can create its own afterlife. I could theoretically do so as well. So if you make a deal with a devil or god, you are going to their afterlife. Prayer, sacrifices, or belief in such a being counts as making a deal, depending on its nature. The benefits are obvious. If you are Christian, for example, you might go to heaven. The downside is as obvious. You might not. You’re not the one who chooses. They are. More than that, you cannot forget that whatever you are making a deal with might change its mind, change the afterlife itself, or be completely different than what you believe it to be.”

“Please elaborate,” she furrowed her brows, not getting the point right away.

“Again, with the Christianity example, one can’t forget that what it means to be Christian has changed over the years. Early Christianity was an apocalypse cult, thinking the world would end in their lifetime. That influenced their views. Later Christians became incredibly militant. Not only was killing and enslaving permitted but it was also encouraged. That is not counting the hundreds of different denominations of Christianity or that Christianity is only one of three Abrahamic religions. You have no guarantee that your belief system, even if it is based on a religion, matches that of that religion’s deity. Or that diety might change over time, and what might have been favourable once no longer is. So it’s a gamble.”

I saw how disconcerting my words made her, Superman, and the other occupants uncomfortable. They had been raised in Kansas, in Christian America, and probably hadn’t dived too deep into history or theology.

I fought the urge to sigh.

Though this world had gods, magic, and all sorts of other ‘heretic’ concepts, I could not forget that comics such as DC or Marvel were formed mainly in very Christian America. More modern stories were more nuanced or dealt with things more fairly, but a considerable part was still steeped in Americana.

One of the most famous heroes was called Captain America and had been around in the early twentieth century! He had punched out Hitler!

There were literal propaganda posters with him as their face!

I hadn’t wanted to go too deep into it for this very reason.

Religion was deeply personal to people and, baring politics, was the easiest way to

spark controversies.

Comic worlds had a bunch of different afterlives, with a dozen other gods or demons to rule them. I had just been trying to explain the rules to the people of this world who didn't have the information I did.

Time for some damage control.

"Look," I said softly. "As you can tell from my story, I have problems with gods. I've died at their hands an uncountable number of times. Their actions doomed that world to a slow decay because they were unwilling to let their power go. To accept that all things must end. But that was those worlds. This one operates by different rules. There is nothing wrong with prayer, belief, or religion. Putting your trust in a higher power can be comforting, and there are benevolent deities. We all know how much effort Thor goes through for mortals. I've married a goddess. Multiple if you want to get technical. Like all things, religion is complicated and cannot be condensed into a few minutes of explanation in a tv interview. I've explained all this not to convert people to my view but to simply ensure people know what they are getting into."

"I see," Lois said, looking a bit more relaxed. "Thank you for the explanation, though I fear we have gotten off topic."

"Where was I?" I asked, knowing but letting her reset where she wanted.

"You had left Priscilla on the Island and met the other inhabitants there," she said easily.

"Right," I nodded.

I continued my story from there, paying careful attention to emphasize how difficult fighting the Lords had been, the atrocities of New Londo and other aspects that highlighted the violent nature of the worlds I travelled to.

That little tangent hadn't been planned, but it served to help humanize me, which was good, so I decided to tell the rest of my story, emphasizing less my human element and more the inevitability of my victories.

When your opponent is immortal, violent, and bent on a goal, it is not a matter of 'if' but 'when' they will find and kill you.

So don't fuck with them.

I blasted through the rest of the Dark Souls series, explaining that after returning to the world for the third time, I had simply decided that the weakening of the fire was inevitable and set out to build a new world for the inhabitants than try and light it again.

Elden Ring led to a few questions, such as clarifications on a few names Lois had noted from Ranni and Melina's speeches but was otherwise blasted through easily.

I framed my world travel as my own skill, though one that left me weak and alone

due to my young age at the time. It was an excellent excuse for why I hadn't curb-stomped any new world I visited right away.

My goal had been to reach my Family on the Island, and I had searched, one world at a time, for a way.

I hinted that I had visited or knew of other worlds, just to keep people guessing, but denied talking about them, citing that we were already low on time for the interview.

Then we got to Bloodborne, and I put the finishing touches on my narrative.

"In that world, afflicted by a plague I helped cure," I explained away, not delving deeply into what I had done. "I had found a way to reach the Island, but in doing so, I had to discard my human form and ascend beyond it. I became more than I was. That was millions of years ago, of course, and a lot has happened since, but we have almost run out of time, so I will skip to the end."

I love telling technical truths. It gives me the tinglies.

"Finally, with my Family, I decided to visit earth as it was familiar to most of them, for obvious reasons. It wasn't all perfect, though. I am afraid the League was right to a degree," I said regretfully. "I had become something that was a threat to others. In size alone, I would never be able to find a planet that could support what I had become. I do wish they had tried to talk first, they would have known that I had mitigated the danger I posed, but I cannot blame them for their caution."

Clark Kent winced.

"You know of my wives," I smiled proudly. "After everything we've been through, they are quite protective of me, and I of them. I would like to use this interview to formally apologize to the superhero community of this world. Their rejection of my Family had hurt Diana and Raven. It was one of the reasons we were operating covertly for the first month on Earth. I didn't want to force them to choose between the Family and versions of their friends. When they surrounded us in Australia last week, I was angry. I was prepared to do something… drastic."

"I am happy things worked out," Lois smiled in turn.

"So am I. If I had gone through with my plan, I would have been sleeping on the figurative couch for at least a month," I said with a chuckle. Lois gave a polite laugh that died at my following words. "Who would think Doomsday would save the world? What a time to be alive."

"…Right. You never know what might happen." She looked at her watch nervously before meeting my eye. "We have run out of the time you promised us."

I didn't know what disturbed her more. That I was planning on destroying the earth, something they knew I could easily do, or that I would only be in the dog house for a

month for doing it.

Either way, I found the bead of sweat on her brow hilarious.

One little joke and I had just coopted any attempts to subvert my Family against me.

Wonder Woman would try a save the world from me if they crossed my line, but that's all she would do.

When we first landed, I held a tiny sliver of fear that she would leave us now that we had found a world like her home. That sliver had been exacerbated by what happened with Doomsday.

It was one of the reasons I had almost lost my cool arguing with her and Artoria.

Fear, as always, was my greatest foe.

That had changed after our last… talk and her gift.

Now I was sure of one thing.

If it came down to it, she would choose the Family over the world, even if she'd be put out with me over it.

"One final question before you leave us," Lois said quickly, shifting the topic away from the armageddon they had avoided by pure luck.

"Alright," I agreed readily, pausing in my rise from my chair to look at her. "I am meeting some friends for drinks soon, but I'm sure they will understand."

"I'm sure they will," Lois said. I only caught the micro glare she sent her husband because I had been looking for it. "It is about your island. It's been a constant in your story, but you never elaborated on it. What is it? Is it a threat to the people of earth?"

"As I said, it's a pocket dimension," I explained. "One that my Family and I have made our home. Think of it as a massive mobile house. But no, it is not a threat."

"You claimed that the creatures of your island would be able to 'drive our civilization back to the stone age.' Please elaborate on why we should not consider it a threat."

"For one, I am keeping them contained," I said, an idea springing to mind. "If I were to die for a while, then yes, it would pose a risk, and something could get out. But we don't have to worry about that."

I hadn't considered it before, but it was a good idea to use the Island as a deadman switch-type threat.

Kill me, and Pandora's box is opened.

"The other reason is you'd have to be monumentally stupid to try and invade a dragon's den, let alone one that has had millions of years to fortify, one that is the size of a continent and is married to some of the greatest mages of all time. Think about how dumb you'd have to be to think going there with malicious intent was a good idea."

"Then why do you allow those with such intent to pass through the barrier?"

“To help the gene pool,” I joked, but Lois didn’t laugh. “Seriously, and I cannot stress this enough. Crossing that barrier is optional, but anyone who does is doomed.”

“So you kill them all?” She asked seriously.

“I don’t need to. I don’t even have to pay attention when someone enters. As something of a connoisseur of ways to die, take it from me, the easiest way someone will die is if they are eaten alive if they cross my threshold. Some of the stuff there…” I shuddered, remembering the Wormfaces, Runebears, Basilisks, the maggots, Blood Flies, and other things that have killed me in the past. “There are no less than ten different kinds of poisonous swamps on the Island, each worse than the last. The animals range from Lightning Goats to full-on Hydras. And I would still take the latter over some of the other creatures that live there.”

“I see…” Lois looked a little pale at the idea of anything that would make me, the Elden Lord and someone who had died countless times, shudder. “Thank you for your time today, and I hope we get the chance to talk again.”

“We might,” I nodded agreeably, standing up. Seeing the reporter still slightly shaken, I put a comforting hand on her shoulder and smiled as the cameras cut and the crew started talking. “As I said, don’t worry about it. So long as I am here, nothing will escape the Island. And anyone who enters is both morally irredeemable and suicidally stupid.” That type of person made great test subjects for Medea. Or food for Medea and the dragons. “Or just plain suicidal.”

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Amanda Waller watched the infrared drone feed as long as she could.

Then she started the video footage of the interview again before looking back to the drone.

Then the ship disappeared, passing through the White Mountains as if they weren’t there, and all she had left to watch was the interview feed.

In the privacy of her office, the head of the PRT let out the smallest of relieved sighs.

There had been some concern that unconscious people wouldn’t count, even if they fit the Elden Lord’s requirements. Thankfully there were no issues.

If nothing else, the massive island was a great way to kill people on death row.

Now, all that was left was to wait.

Out of habit and paranoia, Waller pulled up the dossiers once more to go over everything for points of failure.

For the twentieth time, the head of the Parahuman Response Team concluded that

any point of failure would not fall back on her, the PRT, or the US government.

All six had been contacted through intermediaries, promised freedom in exchange for services. As far as they all knew, they now worked for a rogue agency with a twitchy trigger finger, ready to blow their brains out at the slightest sign of disobedience.

Five of the six had been outfitted with explosive devices inside their bodies, and the sixth, Gavel, had been given enough incentive that, in the unlikelihood of his survival, he would focus more on the Elden Lord than returning to his old ways.

Waller grimaced.

Swamp Thing's escape was of little consequence. The modern Protectorate was more than able to deal with him when he showed his mossy head compared to decades ago. As soon as they knew where he had gotten off to and how he escaped, he'd be back in prison where he belonged.

The Faerie Queen though…

That was a shit show waiting to happen. Even ignoring the optics of the first break out of the Birdcage, the PRT still had no clue where she was, what her goals were, or if she would start another rampage.

There were over thrice as many Supers today than six years ago, more soldiers for her army than ever.

The only silver lining of the entire exodus was that it had provided the perfect cover to sneak Gavel free, even if his escape had been the tipping point that alerted the facility to the loss of its inmates.

The other members had been nowhere near as difficult to recruit as their facilities had been PRT based and thus easier to exfiltrate from their prisons.

Deathstroke and Taskmaster would do well to keep the others in line. They weren't the strongest, but they were the most professional. The latter, in particular, was more deadly than ever. Waller didn't trust any of them, but those two were known to at least keep their word.

Killer Frost, Gavel, and Hookwolf were muscle, barely more than superpowered thugs but useful ones. Waller half expected them to kill each other before this was over, bombs be damned, but that was acceptable as long as they fulfilled their task first.

Ideally, they would band together to stay alive for as long as possible, but there was nothing lost if they didn't.

They were all going to die anyway.

Waller crushed the tiny spark of guilt as she came to the last profile.

She didn't know what the woman had been before she had appeared in Maddison, but Spiral was no longer anything but a ticking time bomb.

One that could use magic, teleport, and paralyze others. When looking at potential 'recruits', the six-armed mutant had fit their needs so perfectly that Waller seriously considered whether she needed the rest of the crew.

With the Simurgh dead, most of her plans were to be considered failures, but appropriate caution still needed to be taken, even if her victims would never recover.

And the mutant, Ziz bomb or not, was simply too valuable to let rot or execute.

At least now, she could do some good for the world.

Amanda Waller was placing a lot of eggs in this basket. She had done everything to be as safe, careful, and discreet as possible. Learning that the Elden Lord would return from the dead was extremely disheartening. It just emphasized the need to pry out his secrets if it was the truth, and talking about the island had clearly been something he didn't want to do.

Even if they could only kill him temporarily, it would still be better than not being able to touch him at all.

As the ship carrying six unconscious villains landed on the shore of the Island, Amanda Waller prayed that this would be enough.

That the risk she was taking would pay off.

That the US would no longer have to fear the Elden Lord's whim.

That the secret of the Dragon's blood would be the key to humanity's independence from the powerful forces that lurked in the darkness of space.

She prayed that her Suicide Squad would do their job and then die, never alerting the Elden Lord to their presence.

Amanda Waller was not the most moral of people or devotedly religious, but she was still human.

Like most people, her dreams were simple.

Success and a better tomorrow than the day that came before.

After her family's tragedy, she spent her entire life climbing the ladder of the world to accomplish those goals.

She had no way of knowing that both of those dreams were mutually exclusive.

She should have prayed for failure.

Author's Note:

Part 3 of volume 2: Probation. The penultimate part of volume 2 is a very important one, even if it will be a lot of setup for part 4 and volume 3. It's starting a bit slow, but we need to set the new baseline.

Remember, between Emancipation 1 and now, it has only been 2 weeks in-world time.

A lot has happened, story-wise, but little time has passed for some actors to move.

That is going to change.

I will be trying something slightly different with this part, a slight tonal shift if you will.

The next chapter will be what you've all been waiting for… the superhero pub crawl.

… And some other stuff, I guess.

I'll see you next week.

PROBATION II

Well her friend is looking at me with an evil grin
I think the bloody racket might soon begin
I must have said something
To the George street queen
The boys are joining in!
Because the old black rum's got a hold on me
Like a dog wrapped round my leg
And the old black rum's got a hold on me
Will I live for another day?
Hey, Will I live for another day?

"One Homeboy," the waitress said, sliding the beer over to Clark, who thanked her kindly. "One Caped Cruiser."

She set the drink in front of the smiling form of Bruce Wayne, who thanked her in turn, shooting me a glare when she looked away for my choice in order.

I smiled guilelessly at him.

"And one 'most absurd drink you have on the menu'," she drawled playfully at me before giving me a wink. "Otherwise known as the Trash Can."

"Thank you, dear," I flashed her a charming smile as I paid for the drinks with a generous tip. Her smile deepened. "Keep them coming?"

"Will do." She sauntered away to her next customers, hips swaying suggestively. "Holler if you need me."

There was a beat of silence before Clark spoke.

"You're married," he reminded me, taking a swig of his beer. "And she's not even twenty."

"First off," I pointed out, sipping my drink. The cup was massive, the liquid was glowing neon blue, and an upside-down Red Bull floated in it.

It wasn't that bad.

A bit sweet.

"I'm tens of millions of years old. Even if all the ages of my wives were put together, I'd still be robbing the cradle. How do you know her age anyway?"

"Her ID's in her pocket," Clark shrugged. "She can serve but not drink alcohol in the states."

I stared at him for a second.

Did he seriously card our waitress?

I shook my head wryly.

“Secondly,” I continued. “Looking is a free action. Look but don’t touch is the rule. I don’t begrudge any of my wives if they find other men or women attractive, and they return the favour. Basic trust. We’re possessive, not jealous. There’s a difference. You can’t tell me, in your industry, you don’t appreciate the… colourful costumes some of your coworkers wear.”

I stared the pair down, daring either to lie and say they had never stared at an attractive heroine or villain in tight or revealing clothes.

Clark looked away, taking another swig of his beer.

Bruce took his first sip, not wilting under my questioning look.

“Why Montana,” the disguised Batman asked.

“Less chance of either of you two being recognized,” I shrugged. “Look around this bar and tell me that anyone here knows Daily Planet photographer Clark Kent or reads celebrity magazines and knows infamous playboy trillionaire, Bruce Wayne.”

The bar I had brought them to first was a small town tavern in some town nestled in the Rockies whose name I didn’t care to remember. The type of place with all wood furniture, a pool table, and a picture of Chuck Norris on the wall.

Perfect for two men in their middle age and an infant Great One to have a few beers and get to know each other.

“Then why are you the only one disguised,” Clark asked.

“If you hadn’t noticed, I’m kinda a big deal,” I ran my hand through my long blond hair, my now green eyes shining in mirth.

Keeping up the illusion was easy. The most annoying part of this whole disguise was the tightness in my body. I could see why Priscilla didn’t like shrinking. It was like squeezing into too-tight pants. You could still move, but it was uncomfortable.

“My face is on every magazine and every news channel, and my name is the current most trending search on the internet. If I were to go anywhere undisguised or without a Stranger effect, I’d be mobbed in moments.”

“Fair enough,” Superman nodded. “To be honest, when you said you’d be taking us out for drinks, I was afraid you’d take us to some loud club or neon-lit dance floor. This is nice. Reminds me of the first bar my Pa took me to when I turned twenty-one.”

“The night is young,” I smiled mischievously before softening it. “But neither of you two would enjoy that. I’m more at home with a cup of tea and a good book than any large party with blasting music. Maybe when we have a few more drinks in us.”

“Please, no,” Clark smiled shakily. “If Lois finds out I went somewhere like that, I’ll be sleeping on the couch for a week.”

“Whipped,” I said in good humour.

Clark nodded, looking proud rather than embarrassed.

What happened tonight didn't depend on me.

"What are we here for," Bruce interjected suspiciously. "Why all this? You know as well as I that alcohol or poison won't work on us."

"Chill, dude," I said in my most nauseating 'surfer bro' accent. "Let the wave of life ride you to the beach of happiness, man." Bruce didn't look amused, but Clark did chuckle. I decided to toss the bat a bone. "We are here to relax. Get to know each other. Build some bridges. Get away from all the estrogen in our lives. I don't know about you two, but I am drowning in it. In my household of twenty-one, the only males in my Family are two drakes and our two horses."

"You have a farm?" Clark asked, interested.

"On an Island that big, of course we have some land to cultivate," I said wryly, my words laced with double meaning. "Not counting anything Tsunade does or Medea's garden of ingredients, we have an orchard and have recently started harvesting animals."

"I thought you said your Island was a deathtrap," Bruce interjected.

"It is," I nodded. "But it is also MY Island. Not only have I cordoned off my home, but I am the top predator there. Nothing messes with me."

Dragon Fear was great for dissuading anything without higher brain functions from trying to escape. "I won't be inviting anyone not part of the Family home, you'd still probably die, but I've been meaning to spend some time with Best Boi Torrent, my steed. If you want, I can ride him there next time you visit the folks in Smallville."

"Thanksgiving is coming up," Clark nodded genially while Batman scowled, not liking the reminder that I knew almost everything about their civilian identities. "We'll be up there all week. Ma would like to meet you, so it should be fine if you want to come by on Monday or Tuesday."

I had been expecting some conditions, maybe a veiled threat or two. This was his family, after all. I guess he really was on board with this whole trust thing.

"Great," I nodded. "Would she mind if Artoria came as well? We've been meaning to have a race, and Kansas would be a great place since my Island doesn't have a good prairie or hill land large enough for us. You can referee since she's so competitive, and I like to cheat."

"Only if you bring Diana," Clark agreed. "Ma's been bugging me to bring them over since the whole Doomsday incident. Wants to thank them in person."

"That it? Sure," I blinked, a bit surprised. "Fair warning though, if there is going to be any food available, she will want to make triple the amount. Artoria has the stomach of a black hole."

“I know,” Clark’s smile twitched slightly. “The League’s chefs have been… vocal since she started dining with us on the job.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” Bruce said. His face returned to a well-practiced smile as the waitress passed by again, but I could tell it was fake. His eyes had been observing me intently the whole time. “Why all this? What are you hoping to achieve by bringing us here?”

I sighed and finished my drink.

Clark being a friendly, farm town homeboy, made it hard to fuck with them.

I would still do it, but I’ll go easy on them for now.

“I’m hoping that if we can’t be friends, we can at least be friendly,” I said, waiving down the waitress for another. “I’m sure you guessed, but Diana is the last survivor of her world.”

Clark winced, but Batman kept staring at me intently, not even blinking.

“You aren’t her dead friends,” I continued before pausing to give a nod of thanks to the waitress and waiting for her to leave. “But you are men almost identical to her best friends, fighting for a cause she believes in. Unless something happens, you’ll naturally be friends again in a few years. It would break her heart if something happened to you because of me. And, I am sorry to say, if a fight were to break out between me and this world, there is a clear winner.”

“We would stop you,” Bruce insisted. Clark almost looked like he would say something but remained silent, watching for my response.

“There’s nothing to stop,” I sighed again. “I am, quite literally, a sleeping dragon. So long as nobody decides to come to tickle me, I will be content to remain sleeping in my lair with my hoard of wealth and my princesses in the tower.”

“And when someone does tickle you?” Bruce asked suspiciously.

I rolled my eyes.

“I will deal with *them*,” I emphasized the last word. “Accordingly. I am not some gibbering madman. I’m reasonable, measured, and controlled. I won’t lash out blindly because some villain decides he wants to commit suicide by Elden Lord.”

“But you’ll kill them,” Batman pressed, his playboy mask slipping as he scowled at me. Clark touched his friend’s shoulder as if to tell him he had gone too far.

“Probably,” I shrugged, not offended in the slightest. “I’m not going to go on a killing spree if that’s what you’re worried about. If someone bumps into me on the road, the worst they can expect is a spell to tie their shoes together or similar pranks. But, yeah, if someone really fucks with me or mine, I’m gonna kill them. If they’re lucky.”

This was my bottom line.

I was willing to play nice, both because of Diana and because I genuinely thought I could be friends with them, but they should never forget who I was.

Their laws were not mine.

Their morals were not mine.

They should never mistake my complacence for compliance.

“Remember those thieves who tried to take my weapons,” I reminded the pair. I had set that trap for just such an occasion. “I got my stuff back, so I let them off with a little scare, and then I let you deal with it. Even though I knew the PRT and SHIELD agents were operating on the orders of their superiors, I sought no further reprisals or dispelled the little charade on camera. I didn’t burn down their organizations or even touch their agents.”

While Bruce continued to meet my eyes without issue, Clark winced.

I didn’t blame him.

After all, I had baited that trap for just such an opportunity, and those loveable greedy bastards had dove right in. I’ll be milking that one for a while.

Aren’t I such a kind, understanding abomination?

“We appreciate your cooperation,” Clark nodded agreeably. “Now and in the future.”

I internally golf-clapped the Kryptonian. By wording it that way, he implied I should leave it to them to deal with similar situations.

Keeping my ego intact while also getting my agreement.

Homeboy knew the game better than expected.

Bravo.

“So long as they don’t cross a line,” I gave him the slight win while keeping my options open.

Honestly, I was too lazy to deal with everyone who’d ever annoyed me. I’d just sick the League on them now.

I could imagine it now.

‘Superman! Go beat that guy up. He bullied me!’

“I hope that has given you some peace of mind,” I nodded at the disguised Cape Crusader. “Though it brought the mood down. Do you know what will solve it? More booze!”

“I’m still working on mine,” Clark replied sheepishly, a third of his beer remaining.

Bruce took the second sip of his cocktail of the night.

“Please,” I waived him off. “You can’t tell me you honestly think that stuff will do anything for you. It was a tension breaker to start the night. Pregaming the pregaming, if you will.”

I finished my second Trash Can with a chug, and rather than call the waitress over again, I dipped my hand into my Bottomless Box.

I withdrew it holding two clay jugs and three clay cups.

“What do you get when you marry a celt who can’t get drunk with regular booze and give her supernatural cooking ability,” I asked rhetorically as the two men opposite me eyed my prizes warily. “You get mead that will get even a Kryptonian drunk.”

“Uh,” Clark stammered as I poured him a cup before using the other jug to pour one for Batman, who eyed it suspiciously. I poured myself one from the first jug. “Is this safe?”

“It’s fine,” I waved his concern away before looking at the billionaire. “Feel free to test it. I’m sure you brought something to test your drinks. That jug is fine for humans. Don’t have any of this one, or Alfred will be scraping you out of bed in the morning.”

I was unsurprised when a small device fell out of the man’s sleeves and dipped in the amber liquid. He then repeated the action with Superman’s cup.

After a second, Batman scowled and put away his tool.

“Now that we know it’s no more poisonous than all other alcohol,” I chuckled, holding my cup aloft. “I propose a toast!”

The other two raised their cups uncertainly, wondering where I was going with this.

“To good friends and happy wives!”

“I can drink to that,” Clark smiled in relief as he clinked his cup with mine. Batman did as well without a word. “That’s good!” The Kryptonian said in surprise as he took another sip of his drink.

“Supernaturally good cooking includes brewing,” I reminded him with a grin as I drank. Batman took the smallest of sips. “Just remember to pace yourself. Scathach likes her booze like she likes her men. Strong and able to knock her on her ass. Don’t drink too much.”

“I’ll be fine,” Superman waived me off, taking another sip.

******

Clark had drunk too much mead.

“I like that plashe,” the Kryptonian slurred as Batman half carried his friend from the building pulsing with light and music.

“Good to know,” the Elden Lord smiled mischievously. “I’ll bring you and Lois again when she can drink again. It can be a regular haunt for you two.”

“Than-ksh,” Clark slurred. “Ya know, you’re a good guy. Ebry one is shhhooow nish. Like ‘at nish lady.”

“You mean the bartender?”

Batman could understand Mikael’s confusion, even if it didn’t stop the glare he was levelling on the man for getting him in this situation. Despite supporting his friend over his shoulder, the hero kept his eyes open as he followed the man down an alley and away from a view of the street.

“Ya. Ya,” Clark nodded drunkenly. “Don tell ‘ois, but I think shhhheeee was into ‘e. I ‘ried ta let ‘er down eashee. She’s purtty, but ‘ois is the ‘est. I wuv Wois.”

The Elden Lord howled with laughter, doubling over and smacking his knees.

Once the disguised man was looking away, Bruce allowed himself a small smile at his friend’s expense.

The Kryptonian, unused to alcohol that could affect him, had drunk way more of the enchanted mead than the other men had recommended.

At one point, using Superman used his superior speed to grab a full jug from Mikael’s hands and run away to chug it.

He only returned when it was empty.

Things devolved from there as the two heroes were swept up in the dragon’s pace.

Mikael had taken the Kryptonian’s inebriation as a challenge and showed a willingness to use illusions to trick the pair into ‘funny’ situations.

Once Clark said the bar was ‘boring’, the Elden Lord decided it was time to take the pair on a world-hopping trip using his magic to teleport the group to various establishments.

Their destinations included, but were not limited to, a vodka factory in Siberia, the Sahara, the Antarctic (where Clark decided to help the melting icecaps using his ice breath), and some sort of magical grove where the trio was chased by monkeys after Mikael swiped some drinks from a tree.

In the privacy of his mind, Bruce could admit that peach wine had been one of the best things he had ever drunk.

The monkeys had only stopped chasing them once Mikeal had thrown a jug of mead at them.

Now they were back in the US, on the east coast, and the night was almost over as the moon descended closer to the horizon.

Bruce thought they might be in Boston but wasn’t sure. The Elden Lord had given them little time for recognizance before disguising the pair with another illusion and heading into another bar.

A gay bar.

Themed around superheroes.

With a drag queen dressed as Captain Marvel as the bartender.

Bruce had subtly slid them a thousand-dollar tip when they kept Clark occupied long enough for him to go on a much-needed bathroom break.

Unlike his small-town friend, the Gothamite knew what sort of people 'cape groupies' tended to be as he was the one that oversaw the League's merchandising operations.

So long as there was no crime, Batman didn't care, even if he was slightly put off by the number of Batmans and Robins engaged romantically with each other.

Returning, the Caped Crusader had half carried his drunk friend out of the bar after 'Captain Marvel' slipped him their number.

Mikael had been laughing from start to finish.

The Caped Crusader had watched the Elden Lord for any trouble throughout the night.

Batman was ready to call the League in at a moment's notice.

He tested every drink for poison, evaluated every destination for an ambush, and used his equipment to disrupt any cameras nearby in case the man thought he could use compromising pictures as blackmail.

Nothing.

Oh, the man was no saint.

A few of the things they had done tonight skirted the line of illegal, to say nothing of the embarrassing situations Clark found himself in.

But the alien dragon had been mischievous and playful, never malicious.

At one point, Mikael had even stepped between Clark and a group of women looking to take advantage of his friend's inebriated state.

Bruce was, dare he say it, starting to relax.

He'd never let the Elden Lord know.

"Oh god," Mikael panted, still chuckling as he rose from his knees. "You're a great drunk."

"'m not drunk," Clark slurred out, his shifting weight making Bruce's life difficult. "'ou are."

"Nah," the Elden Lord denied with a chuckle, approaching the pair and holding up his hands, which began to glow subtly. "I'm a terrible drunk. Too much trauma."

Bruce took a step back, made difficult by his friend's unsteady form.

"What are you trying to do?" He asked suspiciously, finger ready to press the emergency signal in his cuff in the blink of an eye.

Just because there hadn't been a trap yet, didn't mean he had ever dropped his guard.

"Chill," Mikael rolled his eyes. "This is just going to flush the alcohol from your systems. I don't know about you, but I have no desire to bring a drunk Superman home to

Lois."

Maybe it was the drinks, as Batman had been forced to have a few, but the billionaire allowed the disguised dragon to lay his hands on his back.

Warmth passed through the pair as the Elden Lord whispered, 'Flame, Cleanse Them.'

Then everything was clear again. The slight sluggishness of Bruce's thoughts, thanks to the late hour and the drinks, disappeared.

Clark staggered away and threw up on the ground.

"How much did he have to drink," Mikael asked, looking at the Kryptonian in surprise. "That spell shouldn't have any side effects. I've been using it all night."

"Too much," Clark said after he finished retching. "Way too much. Oh god!"

"There, there," the Elden Lord patted his back consolingly. "Everyone knows what beer goggles are like. Nothing to be ashamed of. And he was a very convincing Captain Marvel."

"Oh god!" Clark repeated in horror as Mikael howled with laughter again.

"This has been great," the Elden Lord said, wiping a tear from his eye as the Kryptonian finished emptying his stomach and stood up. "What do you say, one more stop before the night is through?"

"No," Superman denied. "No more drinking. I've had enough for the decade."

"At least I didn't leave you to deal with the hangover," Mikael playfully pouted. Then he placed his hand on both men's shoulders, and they started to glow the pale blue that indicated he was teleporting them somewhere again. "And relax no more alcohol tonight. We're just dropping Bruce off before you."

They disappeared from the alley.

And reappeared in another.

Bruce's breath froze in his throat.

It didn't take more than a glance to recognize this place.

He visited it every night.

Either in person or in his nightmares.

"Where are we?" Clark asked suspiciously, seeing his friend tense. He tensed as well at the Elden Lord's answer.

"Crime Alley, behind the Monarch Theatre in Gotham."

Mist began to gather, its pale white tendrils visible in the glow of the city.

"Why have you brought me here," Batman snarled, fists clenching and body tensing for action.

He should have never trusted the Elden Lord.

"I told you earlier," Mikael shrugged, not intimidated in the slightest. "Tonight is

about building bridges."

Batman was about to show the infuriating man precisely what he thought of him when a voice paralyzed him in place.

"Bruce?"

The Dark Knight barely heard the Elden Lord's following words as he stared in shock at the see-through forms of a man and woman.

"Mom? Dad?"

******

"Do you want me to drop you off at home? Or would you rather fly?" I asked Clark as we stood outside the alleyway.

"I'll stay with him," the Kryptonian said seriously, eyes never leaving the alley. I was looking away, not willing to watch. "You said he has till sunrise?"

"Yep," I nodded easily. "That'll give him a few hours. If you're not going home, let your wife know. I'd hate for there to be a dragon hunt for me because she woke up without you."

"I already did."

"Then I'll see you around."

As I made to teleport back to my home, Superman's voice stopped.

"This is a kind thing you are doing," he said softly. "You didn't have to do it."

"Eh," I shrugged. "No skin off my back. I'm sticking with my promise to not bring anyone back, but letting him talk to them is easy."

At his core, Batman was still the scared, traumatized child who watched his parent's murder. Targeting that aspect was the best way to ingratiate myself.

I got Batman's favour, and he got closure.

This was the kind of emotional manipulation I liked, one that benefited both parties and cost me nothing.

"Still, I know how much this means to him." Those blue eyes stared me down intently. "Thank you. He'll never say it, but this will go a long way towards building trust."

I snorted at Superman's words.

"He won't ever trust me," I denied. "For the same reason I am sure he has a plan for every hero if they go rogue. It doesn't matter what I do, he will keep trying to find my weakness and never rest until he has a plan to put me in the ground. That is who Batman is. Tonight was never about stopping his fear and paranoia. That is impossible without changing who he is. It was about building a rapport that we can live with."

If tonight were a win/lose game of who gained the most information between Batman and me, then the bat won.

He was more intelligent than me. No ifs or buts about it. I am sure he gained a host of valuable data about me, my habits, and my powers.

I had only learned one thing.

But that one nugget gleaned was all I needed to consider tonight, my victory.

My win condition tonight had never been about getting Batman to completely trust me.

It was seeing if he would play along with my game.

At the end of the day, Batman was like me.

We were ruled by our fears, and learning to channel and overcome them was our most significant advantage in a world so much bigger than us.

We'd never leave our paranoia behind.

So, if I could convince Batman, the Man with a Million Plans, the Dark Knight, the mind behind the greatest organization on this planet, to go along with my games and whims, there was nobody left who I needed to fear standing in my way on earth.

Tonight he had engaged in breaking and entering, illegal border crossings, theft, and a host of other minor crimes.

He had done those things before; he was Batman, after all, but that had been in pursuing justice or stopping other crimes.

Tonight he'd done them at my urging.

And I'd rewarded him for playing my games.

We both had lines we wouldn't cross, but until those lines overlapped, we'd be friends.

We'd be friends not because we trusted each other but because we trusted in the other's nature.

Because we were the same type of men.

******

"They're going to betray us," Deathstroke said calmly.

"No shit," Killer Frost deadpanned at the mercenary. "What gave it away, Sherlock? The fact they sent us to an Island full of goddamn monsters? That they asked us to try and cut the dragon the size of a continent? Which we can't do. Or the bombs in our skulls?"

"Speak for yourself, cunt," Gavel ground out, not looking at the others as he continued to roast one of the piglets they had killed. Everyone had already eaten, but he decided he

was still hungry. “Ain’t nothing in my skull. I’m just here for those weapons and to show a stuck-up dragon that he can’t park on my planet.”

“We get it,” the white-skinned woman smirked. “Your heads empty. We all knew that.”

“You wanna go, bitch!” The massive man said as he rose to his feet in a second, an enormous already mallet in his hand.

“Try me chucklefuck!” Far from being intimidated, the cryokinetic sneered right back.

“How?” Taskmaster asked him, ignoring the two posturing villains as he sharpened his weapons.

Slade could appreciate his willingness to stay professional.

Especially when they were in dangerous territory.

“The portal,” Deathstroke nodded at the ship they had landed with. Apart from the six pods they had woken up in and the containers with their equipment, an archway was the only other feature of the remote-controlled craft. “They told us it has seven uses. Six for samples and the last for extraction. None of us are tinkers. We can’t verify their words.”

“It only has six uses,” Taskmaster nodded in agreement. “And I’m sure they will blow our brains out if we go through early.”

“So what,” Killer Frost interjected. “They leave us to rot here? What stops us from going south and telling the dragon about them? We won’t have much choice.”

“We don’t know who the fuck they are, you frigid bitch,” Gavel mocked.

Killer Frost flipped him the bird.

Deathstroke didn’t say anything, nor did Taskmaster though they shared a look.

There were very few organizations with the means to extract all six from different prisons, outfit them with premium alien tech, and do it all in a week.

The portal tech on the ship was something Deathstroke, one of the greatest mercenaries alive, had never seen.

As far as he knew, there was only one, maybe two, Tinkers in the world who could tunnel through dimensions.

“If I were them,” Taskmaster said calmly, not letting another argument start. “The sixth time the portal is used, it will self-destruct and set off our bombs. The only possible witness will be Gavel, who won’t go to the Elden Lord.”

“I’ll go to him, all right,” the massive man waved his hammer suggestively. “I’ll smash him after I crush all those birds of his. I want to see his face.”

“You’re one sick bastard,” Killer Frost spat to the side, though there was some grudging respect in her voice. “Got a pair on you, I’ll give you that. I’m staying the fuck away from Lordy. I don’t want to mess with something that ate the fucking Simurgh.”

“The Elden Lord is the least of our concerns,” Deathstroke interjected. It was like herding cats. “He admitted that he doesn’t care who lands on his island. Instead, we have to worry about the local flora and fauna.”

“And escaping,” Taskmaster pointed out as he set his spears in their sheaths. “As of right now, that portal is our only way out. If we don’t use it to send samples through regularly, boom. If we try and go through ourselves, boom. If we trust their word that we’ll be free, boom.”

“So we’re fucked no matter what!” Killer Frost threw her hands up in frustration, to Gavel’s amusement, as he took the pig off the spit. It wasn’t large, only the size of a regular pig, but it had been a nasty little thing that had tried to tear his leg off.

“For now, we play along,” Deathstroke outlined. “Send samples through once a week. That gives us five weeks to find a way out of this. Either something on this island can help us, or one of the other invaders might be a Tinker we can coopt to mess with the portal.”

“Invaders?”

“We are definitely not the only ones sent here,” Taskmaster explained to the woman. “Countries, other organizations, or Super groups will have sent their agents or armies. The island is so big that nobody will notice a few ships entering in the middle of the night. Once they learnt the Elden Lord wasn’t killing invaders outright, that number will have multiplied.”

“They won’t have the portal we do,” Deathstroke continued. “Those that are still alive will be trapped. Desperate. Even a basic battlefield surgeon with their equipment will allow us to get the bombs out. I’d prefer a Tinker.”

“We can’t go far from the ship,” Killer Frost pointed out. “Not if we want to bring ‘samples’,” she air quoted, “back.”

“That’s what she’s here for,” Deathstroke nodded at the fifth figure around their camp.

The six-armed woman had been sitting there, staring vacantly at the night sky.

Since they had landed, Spiral had not said a word, just following every order given to her.

If Deathstroke was being honest, he wished the other four of his companions would be more like her.

“Who’s she anyway?” Killer Frost asked.

“Spiral,” Taskmaster said. “Mutant. Touch paralysis. Magic. Teleporter. Her numbers are Blaster 4, Mover 7, Striker 5, and Brute 2. All her ratings can increase by one or two, depending on her spells.”

Killer Frost whistled.

“Damn. Can she teleport us out of here?”

“Can you?” Slade asked the mutant, already knowing the answer.

The woman stared at them blankly.

“Didn’t think so,” he drawled, looking back at the villainess. “It might only look like a few miles away, but we are in a completely different dimension. That’s Mover 9. Minimum.”

“Still, how come I haven’t heard of her? That’s B-list at a minimum.”

“She’s a Ziz bomb,” Deathstroke said plainly.

The effect of his words was immediate and violent.

Killer Frost blasted herself away on a sheet of ice, the cold destroying their fire as she pushed herself tens of meters away.

Gavel, who had been in prison since before the Simurgh first showed up, still threw himself away, food forgotten on the ground as he raised his hammer in a defensive crouch.

Spiral did not even blink.

Deathstroke and Taskmaster shared a long-suffering look.

Amateurs.

“What the fuck!” Killer Frost screeched, ice building around her. “What the fuck?!”

“I hate to agree with the pale cunt,” Gavel rumbled, eyeing the two mercenaries. “But what the fuck? Why aren’t we killing her?”

“Because she’s harmless,” Taskmaster drawled. “Watch. Spiral, punch yourself in the face.”

Three fists smashed into the woman’s face hard enough to split her lip, bloody her nose, and blacken her eye.

“The fuck?” The cryokinetic asked again, her tension easing slightly. “You a Master? Cause you totally got to tell us if you are.”

“He’s not,” Deathstroke said, watching as the mutant did a little dance, and the marks on her face disappeared in a small flash of light. “The Simurgh fucked with her mind. She does everything anyone tells her to.”

“Anything?” Gavel leered sadistically at the woman, who was back to staring blankly into space.

“The one thing she does on her own,” Slade drawled. “Is paralyzes everything that touches her. Then she tortures them. It’s how we know her. The PRT tried to make her a hero by blocking her ears to all orders but theirs. It didn’t end well for them.”

“That’s messed up,” the ‘sane’ woman of the group said, cautiously returning to the temporary camp.

“So long as you don’t touch her and know what you’re doing, she’s a useful tool,” Deathstroke said.

Of course, he wouldn't let his guard down just because the Simurgh was dead. Whatever she had planned for the six-armed mutant might still be in effect.

"She'll be useless against any of the other invaders if they know of her, but she can teleport any animals we capture back to the ship and send them through the portal. Or bring us across obstacles, and she'll be useful to escape any sticky situations we find ourselves in."

There was an unsaid agreement between the group that if the portal was a trap, the Ziz bomb would be the one to trigger it.

"Fine," Gavel grunted, sitting back down and looking at his fallen meal in disgust. "I won't touch the daft bint."

"Why are you still here anyway?" Killer Frost asked the mountain of a man as she settled down as well. "Thought you wanted to throw down with the Elden Lord. If you keep travelling south, you're bound to run into him or those bimbos of his."

"Cause I ain't stupid," he grumbled, poking the fire back to life. "I've been in the 'cage for years. No idea what's what, who the players are, or what's up with this fucky island. Costs me nothing to stick with you bastards for a while. You better be thankful."

"So thankful," the villainess drawled sarcastically.

Gavel flipped her off.

"Hookwolf has been gone too long," Taskmaster pointed out.

"Probably ditched us," Killer Frost waived off. "Good riddance. I may be a villain, but at least I'm not a goddamn nazi. Maybe he's going to throw down with the dragon. He's into that dipshit 'gladiator honour' stuff, right?"

"We'll follow his trail in the morning," Deathstroke ordered. Taskmaster nodded, seeing the wisdom in his words right away.

The other two weren't so quick on the draw.

"Why the fuck would we do that?" Gavel asked. "He's the one who left chasing dogs. We don't need him."

"We don't," Deathstroke agreed. He had taken jobs from many unsavoury types in the past, but the nazis had been some of the worst. It wasn't their ideology that bothered the mercenary, just their unprofessionalism.

You'd think they'd have realized after WWII that racial ideology only works so long as you don't shoot yourself in the foot.

Then again, they were nazis.

Nobody accused them of being smart.

"He's carving a path for us," Taskmaster explained. "Our hunting dog. So we're going follow his trail."

“We’re using him as bait,” Gavel grinned.

“He’s going to get rid of anything in our way,” Killer Frost nodded. “If he dies, we learn what got him.”

“We’ll move out at sunrise,” Deathstroke said, looking to the sky to judge the position of the stars and moon. “Six hours or so. One person on watch at all times. Spiral never takes a shift. I’ll take the last one.”

“I’ll take the first one,” Taskmaster called, getting rough agreement from the other.

It was apparent neither of the others had really roughed it before, or they would not have let the two most desired shifts go without argument.

The discussion finished for the evening, the mercenary found a defensible position, set up some rudimentary alert traps, and fell into a light doze.

The slightest crinkle of a nearby leaf or the breaking of a twig would wake him up.

Four and a half hours later, when Killer Frost tried to kick him awake, he was already awake.

“Next time you and Gavel want to get your rocks off, do it when you are not on shift,” Deathstroke whispered, unhanding his pistol.

“Whatever,” the white-skinned woman waived him off as she lay between two trees and tried to get comfortable. “Don’t clam-jam me. First action I’ve gotten in years.”

Slade took a deep breath to recenter himself as he started his vigil.

Fucking amateurs.

The very slight hope the mercenary held that the pair’s tryst would calm them down flew out the window as soon as they started arguing again in the morning.

The pair would not shut up despite the clear danger the island represented.

Deathstroke would kill them both if this is how the next few weeks would be.

Taskmaster looked like he’d help.

There was no greater enemy than an incompetent ally.

If there was one blessing, it was how obvious Hookwolf’s passage was.

It was clear early on that he had transformed into his metallic form, a path of destruction carved through the forest’s underbrush.

Following the road of torn-up dirt, knocked-over trees, and the destroyed forest was easy, and they passed the day unmolested by any island inhabitants, munching on meat leftover from last night’s meal as the day wore on.

Tens of miles later, with the afternoon sun beating down on them, something finally changed.

They heard the barking well before they saw anything out of the ordinary.

The deep braying of wild dogs in the distance echoed off through the forest,

reverberating between the trees unnaturally loudly.

It set Slade's teeth on edge, and the group's progress slowed, their guard raised from the off-putting sound.

The next minute passed in silence but for the howling of mad dogs in the distance.

Then they crested a hill and saw what was causing that awful barking.

Not dogs.

Birds.

A dozen black crows, each half the size of Gavel, their skin sallow and feathers dripping from their body in a disgusting slurry of diseased flesh.

They pecked and clawed, beating each other with their wings and barking like dogs as they fought over the bloody carcass.

"The fuck?" Killer Frost asked in a low whisper.

It was loud enough.

One Carrion Crow looked up, a half-eaten eyeball hanging from its beak as its milky eyes caught sight of the group.

For a tense second, nothing moved.

Then the crow launched its fat, flightless body at them.

Sickly black feathers filled their vision as its compatriots left the dead body and threw themselves with mad abandon at the fresh meat and eyes.

"Jesus Crist!" Killer Frost yelled in fright, stumbling backwards in fear. On instinct, she blasted the murder of crows before they could murder her.

It was enough.

Creepy and disgusting as the barking birds might be, they were still just animals and could not deal with being flash-frozen. The dozens of black birds were trapped in a block of ice a dozen feet across.

"Jesus fucking Crist!" The villainess repeated, trying to calm her pounding heart. With a shaky finger, she pointed to the improvised ice sculpture. "What the fuck are these things?"

"Birds," Gavel spat on the ice. "You live long enough Down Under, and you learn all birds are evil and should die. These were just bigger than most. Good job."

"Thanks," Killer Frost replied sarcastically. "But seriously. Why were they barking? Fuck that noise!"

Deathstroke and Taskmaster ignored the byplay, inspecting the body the crows had been eating.

Vast swaths of flesh were missing, and the face was completely unrecognizable after the birds had gotten a hold of it.

Still, the tattoos and long blond hair were unmistakably Hookwolf's.

"He hasn't been dead long," Slade judged. "Blood is still pretty fresh."

"The birds just arrived," Taskmaster pointed out. "Crows eat eyes and tongue first."

After that first exchange, the pair fell silent as they studied the body and the surroundings.

With every second that passed, their mood continued to darken.

Gavel let out a low whistle as he walked up to the corpse as well.

"Those things did a number on poor Hooky. Couldn't happen to a nicer mutt."

"The birds didn't do this," Deathstroke declared grimly.

This wasn't good.

Not Hookwolf's death. He didn't care about the dead nazi.

It was what this meant for them.

"Look at the back of his skull," Deathstroke used his blade to lift the bloody hair to show the hole to his companions.

"They ate his brain?" Killer Frost asked in morbid curiosity.

"Not yet," Taskmaster said, his voice grim. "They would have eventually, but the birds just got here. Whatever killed him did that."

"That is where you want to shoot if you want to kill someone with a Corona Pollentia," Deathstroke explained. "Something took that little part of his brain right out of his skull. He was still alive when it happened."

"How can you tell?"

In reply to the villainess's question, the mercenary pointed his blade in the direction they had been walking all morning.

A few feet wide, a clear duvet had been carved in the upturned dirt and mud. Red and brown blood dotted the trail from the nearby hillock and ended at Hookwolfs body.

"He crawled his way here," Deathstroke explained lowly, careful to keep his voice from echoing into the distance. "Still alive but bleeding. He would have shifted for better mobility or defence if he could have. He didn't, so he couldn't."

"If he had a hole in his skull, how did he live that long?"

"Say what you will about the mutt, but he was a tough son of a bitch," Gavel grumbled with grudging respect.

Deathstroke shook his head, but his eyes never left the hill they hadn't crossed.

"This was sadism, not endurance. Whatever did this was smart enough to know exactly what to tear out to leave him alive, awake, and helpless. It didn't eat him and let him crawl away and die slowly. For hours before finally passing. He died less than an hour ago but has been crawling since the morning, at the least."

“Fffffffuuuuuuccccckkkkk,” Killer Frost let out in a terrible whisper, staring at the mangled remains.

Then her eyes shot in the same direction Taskmaster and Deathstroke were staring at.

“Is it… still here,” Gavel whispered, hands tightening around his hammer as he glared at the trail Hookwolf had carved.

“We need to find out,” Slade said, his voice even.

Running wasn’t an option. Not without seeing what it was and if it was still here.

Hookwolf had been a Brute 7 in his Changer form, tougher than all except Gavel.

He would not have died easily.

They would be ignorant and helpless if they ran before even discovering what had killed the nazi.

With careful, quiet movements, the group of five slowly inched their way over the next hill. Their breaths were even and measured, and their steps light upon the dirt.

Even Gavel and Killer Frost remained quiet as they slowly and carefully exited the shallow valley containing Hookwolf’s body.

What was on the other side would have been beautiful if they didn’t know what it represented for them.

It still took their breaths away.

A massive hill of metal blades, hooks and other sharp weapons lay in a circle of destroyed forest. It wasn’t wolf-shaped, indicating the Changer had felt pressured enough to give up his favoured form to survive.

Not that it helped him.

Across the pile of metal, small glittering forms scurried, refracting the light of the afternoon sun in a thousand different beautiful hues. They were lizard-like in movement, though the enormous crystals on their backs made them look closer to turtles than lizards.

They chewed on the metal, feeding off the inadvertent monument to Hookwolf’s death.

The entire picture reminded Slade of that art gallery he had bombed a few years back.

The crystalline animals obviously weren’t the nazi’s cause of death.

They were scavengers like the crows, only they preferred metal to flesh and had found an easy meal.

Hookwolf’s killer was obvious, though the group stared uncomprehendingly at the sight.

Like someone had taken a bite out of an ice cream cone to get to the creamy caramel center, a massive hole was torn into the hill of blades.

In that hole, napping in a ball in the afternoon sun with bloody paws, was a chubby

brown and white housecat.

For several seconds the Suicide Squad watched the Crystal Lizards teem over the metal and The Cat enjoying a midafternoon nap.

This time, it was Taskmaster's whispered voice that broke the silence.

"The fuck," he asked in an uncomprehending whisper, the absurdity of the sight breaking through his professionalism.

The Cat's ears twitched.

Deathstroke glared at the man as the rest of the group remained frozen in fear.

They watched for agonizing seconds as The Cat's ears twitched again and again.

Then it sat up.

Slade's heart almost stopped as The Cat looked over at them.

He would swear until the day he died that its verticle slits met his eyes.

And laughed.

With languid movements, The Cat stretched in a cat yawn.

Its back arched as it stretched, showing off a pair of tiny draconic wings. The Cat was only slightly fatter and larger than a regular house cat, but those wings were obviously too small for its rotund form.

Finished with its stretch, The Cat started licking its bloody paws as it eyed them.

Deathstroke didn't know if it was mocking them, contemplating killing them, or simply cleaning itself.

Probably all three.

He readied his gun.

The Cat gave the group one last lazy look, then turned around.

It made a point of showing them its asshole as it leapt into the air, tiny wings flapping as it flew off to who knew where.

Nobody said a thing for a long minute and kept their eyes on the sky, fearful of The Cat's return.

When nothing happened, they unclenched.

"Holy fuck," Killer Frost let out a shuddering breath. "I have never been so scared in my life."

"Same," Gavel grunted in agreement rather than argue. "I don't think I want the Elden Lords' weapons anymore. Let's get off this fucking island."

"Spiral," Deathstroke ordered the mutant, regaining his composure. "Capture a few of those crystal creatures. Paralyze them, send them through the portal, and return."

With a wiggle of her hands and hips, the six-armed woman disappeared in a flash of light.

“That will satisfy whoever’s holding our leash for now. Let’s get back to Hookwolf’s body,” the mercenary told the group. “I want his bomb so we know what we are dealing with. Then we’re going to find someone who can take them out. I want off this fucking island.”

There were noises and nods of agreement as everyone was just as eager to leave.

Deathstroke had a reputation as a mercenary that got the job done, but that was predicated on a job being possible in the first place.

With a contractor planning on leaving them to die on this island, he felt no guilt at reneging on his promise.

The Suicide Squad had been on the Elden Lords’ Island for less than a day, and the first one had already died.

He wouldn’t be the last.

Author's Note:

Do I find it funny that the Nazi Wolf was killed by a housecat(?) before he even got a speaking line in the story?

Yes.

Yes, I do.

I'll see you all next week.

PROBATION III

It came with a warning, now we're all out of time
This romance with ignorance has left us behind
Sit back, relax, begin
It's too early for surrender
Too late for a prayer
We can't go to hell if we're already there
They say the end is coming
And I need to prepare
We can't go to hell if we're already there

"I hath placed mine Diorama. They art entrapped," Ranni reported.

"Thanks," Tsunade smirked, cracking her knuckles.

She loved this part.

The former Hokage punched.

The mountain shattered.

The earth upended from the force of her blow, cratering and sending dirt flying into the air as the cave system below their feet collapsed spectacularly with a deafening rumble.

Like an anthill crushed by an elephant, the collapse was total and catastrophic.

Like an anthill, the survivors flooded from the tunnels as they tried to flee.

They could not.

Any who tried were met by Ranni's dolls or Tsunade's clones who had been placed at the exits. Their bodies, blasted and frozen, warned of the futility of flight.

As one, like marionettes dancing to the same tune, those few survivors of the collapse of the base and Ranni's culling turned to fight their way out.

Tsunade met them easiliy.

The blonde wove through body and blade, dodging with speed and grace born from long years on the battlefield.

The ninjas of her world were faster, stronger, had weirder abilities and were overall better in every way than The Hand.

Ninja in this world were stealthier, trickier, and more subtle than those of the Elemental Nations. They had to be. They lacked the power and speed chakra gave those of Tsunade's homeland and lived in a world where they could be killed by a farmer with a hoe that got lucky.

Tsunade lived in a world where men dropped meteors on each other. Stealth still had

its use in her world, and she knew her way around the clandestine arts, but its value decreased as one ascended the ranks.

It doesn't matter if you can hide in a forest if your enemy can destroy the entire forest in a breath of fire.

And Tsunade was the greatest kunoichi to ever live.

It was not a battle.

It was a slaughter.

They were literally genin trying to take down a Kage.

What few chunin and singular jonin that had been in the Hand's base were felled just as quickly as all the others.

The former Hokage might not be the strongest or most dangerous member of the Family, but any who underestimated her would die for it.

Tsunade was not just the greatest kunoichi to ever live in her world. She had spent over a year learning Haki, had an Aura to protect her, and specialized in Taijutsu to the degree that Yoruichi was the only woman on the Island able to compete with her in hand-to-hand combat.

The slaughter was over in just a few minutes.

Not a sound escaped the ninja as they were slaughtered to a man.

They did not beg for their lives, cry out in pain, or ask questions.

They just died.

Tsunade was unbothered by this.

Not only from her experience from her world, but this was hardly the first Hand base she had destroyed.

They were all like this.

The only difference this time was the companion with her.

"A few hath tried to escape by way of secret passages," Ranni reported. "Mine dolls hath slain them."

"Got it," Tsunade nodded, dropping down into the crater she created and entering the tunnels. "Just give me the directions."

"Follow my Grace," Ranni said as she floated beside the blonde.

Tsunade could not see her reflection, or she would have seen a pale blue glow fill her irises.

What the Hokage could see was a line of pale blue light leading her through the tunnel, guiding her toward her target.

"Useful," Tsunade nodded as she followed the guidance of blue Grace down the dim and claustrophobic halls of the mountain base.

“My thanks,” Ranni said with a calm smile. “Our Lord Husband taught me the trick of it whilst I was teaching him illusions. I hath centuries to go before I am the equal of Queen Marika and the Elden Beast.”

“It’s handy for missions like this one,” Tsunade complimented.

Typically, the kunoichi worked together with Yoruichi, their skills in stealth complimenting each other, but they had decided a magical expert was needed for this venture.

Ranni was available, and Tsunade wasn’t opposed to spending time with the goddess.

She knew the blue-skinned woman had been starved for companionship, but the radiant smile that covered her face was a bit much in the blonde’s eyes for a simple compliment.

Tsunade could see why Mikael and Yoruichi loved to tease her.

Ranni reminded the Hokage of…

Tsunade did not allow herself to continue that line of thought, focusing instead on following the blue light and keeping her senses open for any potential traps or ambushes. Just because The Hand had never managed to hurt her before didn’t mean she should let down her guard.

“I do wish I needn’t have such limits,” Ranni admitted. “Had I been as proficient as Marika, I needn’t have talked to that boorish man and received the images of our targets. The need for a visual aid is a weakness a Princess of Caria can hardly accept in our spellcraft.”

“We all start somewhere,” Tsunade said philosophically. Even she had needed hand seals and chakra control training early in her career. “And if Strange had been a problem, I would have flattened his house.”

“T’would be no more than he deserves,” Ranni sniffed haughtily. “What manner of ‘sorcerer supreme’ would allow thieves into his sanctum without appropriate defences.”

“To be fair,” Tsunade said, punching a door blocking their way to pieces and stepping over its remains. “Medea did get rid of his wards. I have no idea if magic like that takes a long time to fix.”

“He should have prepared for the loss of his defences. My manor was not only protected by illusions and barriers but also by defenders, monsters, and a dragon. Most of which would return within hours of their destruction. That Strange did not account for such a possibility speaks poorly of the mages of this land.”

Tsunade did not know about magic to argue with the goddess, so she remained silent as they walked.

Ranni broke the companionable silence a few minutes later.

“Hath he answered thy request?”

“Hm?” Tsunade grunted in question as she absently smashed the skulls of two Hand ninjas together when they tried to ambush her.

There was a trick to smashing skulls hard enough to kill them without making a mess of splattered brains and grey matter. A trick Tsunade had learned years ago.

“On the subject of children,” Ranni elaborated. “Has our Lord Husband decided to bless you with child?”

“If he did, I wouldn’t be drinking so much,” Tsunade smirked, dusting her hands off as the dead bodies slumped to the ground. “Why the question? You want kids?”

“In a few decades,” Ranni nodded calmly through her cheeks were flushed a light azure. “Once I hath mastered mine Order and the Elden Ring. T’was just an errant thought for the moment. Why the delay?”

“Mikael says he’s waiting for Amelia to be released from their confinement,” Tsunade explained.

“Is his body impaired?” Ranni asked in alarm.

“He’s not infertile,” Tsunade rolled her eyes. “If he was, I’d know. One of the perks of the Catalogue is the ability to control one’s fertility. None of us will get pregnant without his explicit intent.”

“Then why hath he need of the fleshwarper?”

“No idea,” Tsunade grunted. “If it was a healing issue, I’d know about it.”

“Most curious,” Ranni said, floating to the side as Tsunade threw another body over her shoulder. How many of these ninja were there? “Should it not be too personal a question, why dids’t thou request an infant so soon.”

Tsunade made a light misstep at the question and kicked the last ninja hard enough to completely render him into bloody chunks.

The Hokage scowled.

She hated getting blood on her sandals.

“Thy hath known our Lord Husband longer than I, in a manner,” Ranni continued. “Nevertheless, thy wish for children so soon after he hath regained his form is… uncharacteristic.”

“You’re right,” Tsunade said, continuing to follow the Grace. “That is too personal.”

“My apologies,” Ranni nodded, backing off. “I meant no offence.”

Tsunade let out a weary sigh.

It was easy to forget that Ranni and Melina had only been with the group for less than two months.

The pair lacked the year of camaraderie the others had built together and were

unaware which subjects were sensitive to whom.

In her own way, Ranni was trying to reach out and build that friendship with Tsunade.

“I had a lover,” Tsunade said suddenly, interrupting the silence that had fallen after the goddess’ apology. “We were planning on getting married. Starting a family. But we were at war, so we decided to wait. He died.”

So much went unsaid in those few sentences.

The dream she shared with Dan. The other dream he had, to be Hokage, the one she had accomplished but never wanted.

The necklace.

“Before that, I had lost my brother,” Tsunade continued, not even bothering to keep punching the Hand ninja. They all died as roots grew from the ceiling and strangled them. “After the war was over, I went into mourning for years, decades. I only returned to my home when my teacher, a man who had been a father to me, was killed.”

Ranni remained silent, letting the blonde continue.

Tsunade appreciated it. This was hard enough as it is.

“A teammate of mine had been in love with me for years. I could never return his feelings as a child. God, was he an annoying pervert,” Tsunade smiled slightly at the memories as genin under Sarutobi-sensei. “When we were older, I met Dan and fell in love. Then I was grieving. It never seemed the right time to try and build something with him. Always something in the way, always something else to do. Most of it my fault.”

“What happened?” Ranni asked softly.

“Right when he returns to the village after being gone for three years, right when I think about giving him a shot, he runs off and gets himself killed. By one of his former students!” Tsunade destroyed a wall she passed at the thought of Pein.

Naruto and Jiraya were better people than her.

If she had been in the Uzumaki’s place, facing the source of so much of her pain, Tsunade would have killed him. She had tried to do so when he had invaded the Leaf, and it had nearly killed her.

It would have, if not for Naruto convincing Pein he was wrong.

“My last hope was a young man, a boy I loved like a son,” Tsunade sighed. “I was betting everything on him. Our people’s hopes and dreams. My biggest dream was to pass my title, my hat, to him. I died fighting for that dream.”

They reached their destination, a storeroom filled with crates, barrels, and other containers.

“But I am still here,” Tsunade sighed wearily. She couldn’t be bothered to go through

it all, so she started to seal the containers in seals for her transport. “The fact that I am means my world no longer exists. He died. And I am still here.”

Even before Tsunade had learned that their worlds were gone, she had not been in a good place.

Once more, she had lived where others had died.

For months she had been listless. Tired.

So goddamn tired.

The beauty of the Island, the other women, the mystery of their imprisonment, none of that mattered to her.

She only got out of bed in the morning to reach for the sake bottle.

As the best med-nin in the world, the blonde had recognized clinical depression when she saw it. It was one of the leading causes of death for ninja in her world. She could have tried jutsu, medication, or other techniques to try and mitigate it.

Tsunade just didn’t care enough to bother.

So she retreated into herself and the bottle.

When Yoruichi expressed interest in bedding her, the Hokage went along with it from pure apathy.

She wasn’t opposed to a relationship with another woman, but Yoruichi had been a rebound, plain and simple. Over the year spent together, the kunoichi had come to develop feelings for her friend, but at the start, it was a physical relationship born of grief and loneliness.

After her failure with men, why not try it with a woman?

It wasn’t like her luck could get worse.

“My condolences,” Ranni said, levitating more crates onto the scroll. “I hath never had a lover before Mikael, and cannot understand thy pain. My mother, however, was abandoned by my father. It destroyed her. That thee still find the willingness to love is proof of thy strength.”

Tsunade let out an unladylike snort as she sealed up the goods.

Her strength.

Right.

“It wasn’t anything like that,” Tsunade said as they left the storage room and exited the base. They took a different route as she wanted to clear out the remaining ninja before they left. “I never wanted to fall in love again. Too much pain. Too much heartbreak. And certainly not with Mikael.”

“Why so ever not,” Ranni turned, floating backwards through the halls as she frowned at her companion. “Our Lord Husband may be a letch, too infatuated with his own voice

and a buffoon to the greatest degree, but he is still a fine man. Kind yet strong. Intelligent and humourous. Attractive and loyal. I hath found no greater man to be mine consort."

Tsunade rolled her eyes.

Save her from maidens in love. Ranni might be older than her by several millennia, but she was still very much her junior in matters of relationships.

"I'm not saying I don't love him now," Tsunade emphasized the last word. "I'm saying he is the worst person I could fall in love with. You know about Warranty Plan?"

"I do."

"Mikael is paranoid that it won't work." Tsunade actually approved of that aspect of his character. Paranoia kept people alive. "But if it does work, we will return to life so long as he lives. The only way for us to die for good is if he releases us, which he won't do unless we beg him or for him to already be dead. So we will all outlive him."

It might not be soon, it might be in millions of years, but there would come a time where Tsunade outlived another man in her life.

She wouldn't survive that.

Not without something to hold onto.

"I waited too long with Dan. With Jiraya. I refuse to wait with Mikael!"

"I understand," Ranni nodded, idly freezing a group of ninja that had tried to attack her from behind. "If thou will forgive another inquiry, what led to thy decision to pursue an amorous relation with our Lord Husband if such was thy fears?"

"Couldn't tell you," Tsunade shrugged.

"I do not understand," Ranni frowned in confusion. "T'is it a secret?"

"I mean, there is no clear-cut day or reason I can point to and go, 'this is why I love him'," Tsunade explained. "I liked him well enough. As you said, he has redeeming qualities and is attractive enough, but for months I simply considered him a friendly face. It was like we were on a long-term mission together, and we got along by nature of the time spent together."

"Then how can thee declare thy love with such certainty? T'is my understanding that his 'lures' and 'aura' may increase positive emotions to him but may not create love from nothing."

"Sometimes, love sneaks up on us," Tsunade shrugged. "It doesn't need a concrete reason, an overt moment or some grand gesture. Emotions are like that."

Ranni's lips pursed together in thought.

By now, Tsunade had a decent grasp on the goddess' character. She was a schemer, like Mikael, and most schemers did not like the idea of such randomness.

"The best I can give you is an approximation of the time and my best guess," Tsunade

offered.

"If thee would be so kind."

"It was after we had been told our worlds were destroyed Mikael was between his second and third world," Tsunade narrated, thinking back to those days. "We had this big sending-off party. Drank a lot. Cried a lot. Told stories of the people we'd miss, the dreams we never fulfilled, and stuff like that. We grieved for days, some for weeks. In many ways, we are still grieving."

Ranni remained silent.

Her world still lived. Another aspect that set her apart from the other women of the Island.

"I couldn't tell you the exact day, but it was at some point after we were summoned to the third world. I woke up one day and realized I would be summoned in a few hours. I got ready, spent time with the others, was summoned, came back, watched a few movies and went to bed."

"I do not understand," Ranni tilted her head in question as she bobbed lower in the air to duck under a doorway. "In what manner would that indicate love? T'was nothing special in mine eyes."

"The next day, I realized I did not have a single drink the entire day before."

Ranni still looked quizzical, not understanding the significance of that fact.

Tsunade sighed.

Of course, the goddess from a world with terrible medical information would not understand the link between alcoholism and depression. Why would she? She spent thousands of years as a doll without the need to eat or drink.

"At some point," Tsunade explained slowly. "I stopped trying to numb the pain with sake. I couldn't tell you when that was, just that I started looking forward to my days. To waking up. It was no longer a chore. A few weeks before, I learned that my entire world was destroyed. I still mourn that loss, even today, but I realized that I could accept that. I made peace with the pain. With peace, came a willingness to love again."

Tsunade still drank, of course. But she did it because she loved the taste of sake. She did it not to numb the pain but for the pleasure of a good drink with good company.

She did it with Family.

"I thank you for sharing," Ranni said as they reached the bottom of the hidden base. The last three ninja did not even move from their praying positions as her Ice Blade decapitated them. "I admit, I have felt some fear of the disconnect I share with the rest of my Lord's consorts. I am glad we have talked, and if thee ever wish to ask questions in turn or need aid in locating something, please let me know."

“I’ll probably take you up on that offer,” Tsunade smirked. “You made finding this place a breeze. Next time Yoruichi and I need to blow off some steam, you should come.”

“I shall,” Ranni smiled softly. “Dos’t thou wish to destroy this place, or shall I?”

“You do it,” Tsunade said with a smirk. “I haven’t had the chance to see what you got.”

“I shall endeavour to not disappoint,” Ranni said with pride, raising her arms. But then she paused, head tilting in question. “Before I do, pray tell me what these ‘ninja’ were worshiping?”

“That?” Tsunade asked, looking at the statue the goddess was indicating. “That’s supposed to be some sort of demon. I think it’s called ‘the Beast’ or something. According to Mikael and Emma, the Hand is controlled by it, influencing them toward nihilism and annihilation. Why?”

“Idle curiosity,” Ranni shook her head. “I simply find the objects of worship of this land fascinating in their diversity. T’has become a hobby.”

“This one isn’t anything special,” Tsunade shook her head. “It’s never done anything, given blessings or anything like that. No matter how many of its basses we’ve smashed. Honestly, I don’t think a real demon is behind The Hand.”

“How so?”

“The statues don’t line up with what Mikael told me to expect,” Tsunade explained, looking at the sculpture at the center of the room. “He said the Beast is a ‘fat bastard who never gets off his lazy ass.’”

“I would not call it fat,” Ranni tilted her head as she looked at the statue.

It was not fat at all. It depicted an incredibly large and muscular man with his arms crossed. It had no facial features, hair, or other identifying marks, but by its posture, it was clear it was looking down on the world in arrogance.

“I think this is another one of those differences between Emma’s world and this one,” Tsunade stated. “Instead of a demon, some sort of psychic or Master is controlling the Hand. It would explain why they’re not undead like in Emma’s world and are completely unresponsive to words. Nothing is going on in their brains but their missions.”

“How dull,” Ranni said, conjuring a pale blue moon in her outstretched palm. “Whosoever they are, they made the mistake of drawing our Lord Husband’s attention by stealing his gift to the Sorcerer Supreme. There is nowhere to hide on this planet from mine Order.”

“If we keep smashing bases like this, they’ll have to do something,” Tsunade said as she opened a portal to the Island. While Ranni, Medea, or Raven could teleport, they could all return to the Island at will so long as they had a few moments to concentrate. “Each

base might not mean much, but if we keep hounding them enough, it will force them to show their tail. It was a tactic we used during the shinobi wars to force stronger ninja to respond and give us information on their abilities and locations."

"Should the fiend appear, alert me. I wish to show it the error of standing against our Family."

"Meh," Tsunade led the goddess through the portal and closed it before Ranni's spell hit the ground. The Himalayas just lost a mountain. "They're more of an annoyance at this point. The only reason Mikael cares is he's petty. Like what happened with the Titans, he doesn't like being toyed with. I agree with him that if there are players out there trying to manipulate us, we should know and stop it. Don't tell him I said that. His head will grow any larger."

"His ego is fragile for all its size," Ranni smiled mischievously. "Let us alert Lady Melina. She shall add it to her chronicle."

Tsunade chuckled.

Melina's book, a recounting of Mikael's time in the Lands Between, was the worst-kept secret in the Family.

The second worst-kept secret was how embarrassed it made the man.

A dry retelling of the facts would not have mattered to him in the least, a helpful tool for propaganda, but Melina was making a special effort to point out all the good he had done.

Call Mikael an abomination, a monster, or insult him, and he'll laugh it off. Empty flattery would only stroke his ego, and trying to tease him would see him return the favour hundredfold.

But give him a sincere compliment, or worse, write a book with him as the hero, and he'd squirm uncomfortably, blush, and flee the room or change the subject.

All attack, no defence.

Honestly, if there was one thing that showed how close Melina and Mikael were, it was how easily the maiden could get under his skin. It was only after her arrival that the women managed to fight back against his constant teasing.

Tsunade found it cute but also worrying.

Mikael would be the first to crow about his achievements, taking pride in his actions and being self-aware enough to recognize their impact on the world. But he got uncomfortable the second someone tried to make him seem heroic.

How isolated had Mikael been that some basic positive reinforcement could make him so uncomfortable?

It was a shame that he and Emma were still at odds, or she would have asked the

mutant about her worries.

Thoughts like these swirled in Tsunade's mind as they returned home.

As Tsunade and Ranni walked up the path to the house, they passed Priscilla tending to the four young drakes outside the large building that was their home and stable. The massive red beasts, each the size of a house, rubbed up against the tall crossbreed affectionately as they vied for her attention.

Only, instead of petting them, feeding them or singing to them, the hybrid was staring northward, her eyes unfocused as she looked at the mountain range that separated their home from the rest of the Island.

Ranni and Tsunade slowed to a stop at the uncommon sight. Andromeda and Hengeron II started tugging the crossbreed's dress for attention. Llamrei II and Cassandra started wrestling, their massive bodies tearing up the ground with spikes, tails, and wings.

Priscilla stared northward, paying no attention to the ruckus.

"Lady Priscilla," Ranni asked in concern. The crossbreed did not move, and the pair of women frowned. The goddess floated over to the woman and shook her shoulder gently.

The crossbreed jerked into focus with a start, her eyes staring at Ranni in wide-eyed confusion.

"Lady Ranni," Priscilla asked in confusion. "When didst thou arrive?"

"A mere moment ago," Ranni said, still frowning in concern. "What has beguiled thee? Art thee well?"

"I am fine," the crossbreed shook her head but turned to look northward again. "I merely felt an emanation of power from the Island that captured mine attention. T'is gone now."

"What sort of power?" Tsunade asked, approaching as well.

"One of a similar nature to my Element, though not the same."

"Death?" Tsunade asked, closing her eyes and extending her senses.

Despite her chakra control, she had never been a sensor ninja. But, like all good ninja, she cheated.

So long as she was on the Island, she could connect her Element to Mikael's and extend her senses through the plants that covered the land. It wasn't perfect, plenty of places did not have enough plants for her to sense completely, but it was enough to find pretty much anything.

As Tsunade reached out, she found what she had expected.

The number of invaders had decreased to a few hundred again. After last week's interview, most who had entered the dimension had already died. A few were still clinging to life, but they'd fall to animals, plants, land, or Medea's experiments. Even as she

‘watched’, more died.

None of them felt like ‘death’.

“Indeed,” Priscilla nodded. “I no longer sense it, but for a moment, t’was there. I am sure of it. T’was a strong presence, as potent as Diana’s, but fleeting. It flickered in and out as a candle in the night.”

Tsunade frowned and redoubled her effort to search.

Anything as strong as Diana was worrisome.

“We shall alert Lady Medea,” Ranni declared. “She is the one who ventures out beyond the mountains most frequently. We shall also tell our Lord Husband of this. T’is his Island. Nothing shall hide from his eyes if he brings forth another Dreaming.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Tsunade continued to frown. There was something there. Something on the edge of her senses that was utterly unknown to her yet familiar. It felt nothing like ‘death’ or the undead, but it was *something*. “If it comes and goes like Priscilla says, it might not be a person but an ability. Something like Edo Tensei, a powerful technique that summons the dead, can be cast and rescinded. Unless they use it, we’d have no way of knowing who did what. They’d look like everyone else.”

“Still, there will be value in the attempt, even should it fail,” Ranni said. “Though I shall request he let us deal with it. His rest need not be disturbed.”

Tsunade continued to search but found nothing. It did not ease her concerns.

Something was on the Island, something powerful.

The only things that could pass through the barrier were those with malicious intent.

When the women reported their discoveries to Mikael, he facepalmed and shook his head in exasperation.

Ninety percent of everything he said was bullshit, but people decided to test one of the few absolute truths.

He had told everyone of this world multiple times.

Anyone who entered the dragon’s den would die.

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“This is bullshit!” Gavel swore as his hammer smashed the last of the massive ants to puss.

“We know it’s bullshit,” Killer Frost sighed. “Stop being a little bitch about it. The ants are better than the bears.”

“Or the dogs,” Taskmaster interjected as he pulled one of his twin spears from an ant’s head.

All four of them shuddered at the memory.

Even Spiral seemed to flinch at the memory of those massive dog/t-rex things that had chased them for hours.

Taking on one or two each would have been fine, even thirty or forty, with the whole group with some injuries and advantageous terrain. But over a hundred?

Gavel might have survived, thanks to his ability to take limited damage, but the horde of beasts would have killed the rest and tortured the massive man for hours before he killed them all.

Assuming more didn't show up.

So they had fled underground into this cave system filled with enormous red ants.

That had been over a day ago.

The Suicide Squad had hoped that the tunnel system connected to another exit, but it just kept going deeper and deeper.

It was getting to the point that they were considering having Spiral teleport them all back to the ship, which would have set them back over a week in their explorations.

One night they had tried to use her to teleport them back to the ship for the night. When they teleported in the morning to their previous farthest point, the group was surrounded by a bunch of golems made of crystal.

They decided to keep teleportation to a minimum after that.

For now, they were going to push on. The ants weren't a threat, as giant and numerous as they might be. The Tunnels limited how many could attack at once.

The real threat was the stench.

The limited air in the caverns was filled with the smell of rotted meat, blood, death, and biological waste. The ants must not have any sense of smell, or they would not have pilled up their food in these grotesque mounds of blood and bones. The footing was treacherous as the bones would shift and slip under their feet as they fought off the massive insects.

"We should leave," Gavel growled, smashing his hammer on the ground for emphasis. "I don't care if we gotta start over. I'm sick of smelling this shit. I want some good food, damnit! I'd kill for one of those boars right now."

Deathstroke ignored him, shifting his blade through the piles of blood and bones.

Where was it?

"As much as I hate to agree with this neanderthal." Killer Frost ignored Gavel flipping her off with long, practiced ease. "We ain't getting anywhere. We should teleport to the forest before we ran into those dogs. Instead of heading north, we'll head south and circle around the mountain."

Slade would swear he had seen that glint of metal, familiar to all soldiers, when an ant had been sent tumbling down when he cut its head off.

“The same forest filled with bears the size of a house?” Taskmaster asked, his derision for the idea plain in his voice. “Those same super aggressive bears, covered in magic runes, that we could barely hurt?”

“I’d rather run from a fucking bear in the fresh air than stay here for another day!”

There!

In a pile of bones in shapes and forms unfamiliar to the mercenary were the remains of something he recognized at a glance. It was dented, shattered, and missing most of its pieces, but it was clearly a human rib cage.

And wrapped around one of the ribs was his prize.

“After passing the forest of bears we can barely kill, we’d go around the mountain?” Taskmaster continued dryly. “The mountains covered in wyverns that breathe fire and lightning? The wyverns that can fly when we can’t?”

Whatever counterargument Gavel and Killer Frost were going to present never left their lips.

“We keep going,” Deathstroke ordered, his tone brokering no argument.

“Why should we?” Killer Frost denied, not cowed in the slightest.

Rather than answer with words, the mercenary held up his discovery.

Hanging on the end of his blade, dented and covered in blood, were the familiar metallic forms of dog tags.

“Where did you find those,” Taskmaster asked, his eyes roaming the pile of bodies.

“A skeleton over there,” Deathstroke nodded at the shattered ribcage.

“So the ants got some poor schmuck,” Killer Frost rolled her eyes. “We knew other people would be on this deathtrap. It just means we got here too late.”

“No,” Gavel denied, grasping the discovery’s significance as he looked first to where they had come in from, then further down the passages. “Dog tags mean soldiers. Military. Unless they were airdropped, unlikely with the dome, they came by ship. A military ship. What country are they from?”

“The writing is in Russian,” Slade smirked. “Ground Forces, 1107th.”

Taskmaster let out a low whistle that echoed in the dark tunnels.

“They were serious about this,” Taskmaster said, stopping his search.

“Stop being so damn vague!” Killer Frost looked annoyed to be the only one out of the loop, so Deathstroke explained.

“There is no 1107th. It’s a cover. It’s a made-up group for soldiers in the Kremlin Guard. The elites, trained to work with the Winter Guard.” Deathstroke knew of them

thanks to a few contracts, and he imagined it was the same for Taskmaster.

“They sent their fucking national Supers to this hellhole!?” Killer Frost asked in disbelief. “What if the dragon notices? He’d know right away who they were. Then they’re fucked.”

“Probably only one or two,” Gavel denied with a smirk. “The big wigs’ll claim the Supes went rogue with their teams. Wipe their hands of them. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“We saw no casings, bullet holes, or other signs of military action on the way in,” Taskmaster said. “The ants aren’t sneaky enough to sneak up on a whole group of trained soldiers, nor would they only kill and eat one. The soldiers came in from somewhere else.”

“Of thanks fuck,” Killer Frost sighed in relief. “A military ship sounds great and all, but I’d rather worry about finding it once I don’t smell this shit anymore.”

“We keep going,” Deathstroke repeated his earlier words, and this time there was no more disagreement.

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It took almost a day for them to find the next sign of other humans, the tunnels were winding and interconnected, and they had to backtrack a few times as they reached dead ends. They only found a few guns’ bent and broken remains, but it was enough to show they were on the right track.

More and more signs of soldiers appeared as they delved deeper into the tunnels under the mountain. No bodies, the ants didn’t leave any meat uneaten, but arms, bullet holes, and the destroyed remnants of clothes became increasingly common.

They had discovered enough supplies to outfit fifty people by rough estimation. That was only what they found. There was certainly more in the tunnels.

A small army had died in these tunnels.

Recently too.

It was impossible to get an exact date, but the few human skeletons they did find were fresh enough to know they had been eaten within a few weeks.

Something finally changed on the second day after they found the dog tags.

All traces of the ants stopped.

No footprints, no remains, no mark of any animal passing through those deep tunnels.

The Suicide Squad would have turned back if not for the clear footprints in the dirt from standard-issue army boots. They had remained there for weeks, preserved in the caves, thanks to a lack of airflow, exposure to the elements, or other creatures walking over them.

The five criminals continued deeper under the mountain, following a clear trail unhindered by foes. They made much better time.

It only took them a few hours to reach their ‘destination’.

The putrid stink of rotted meat and dead bodies, left behind with the ant caves, was replaced with a sickly sweet scent.

The pinkish-red glow filled their eyes as they stepped out of the claustrophobic caves into a glowing cavern so large they couldn’t see the ceiling or the other wall. A pink mist filled the air, further obstructing their vision.

The lake of red water, covered in sickly black spots, was glowing an eerie light, and sickly trees stood in its shallow depths as waves lapped the walls below the small outcropping they found themselves on.

“Why.” Killer Frost bit out, enunciating every word slowly as her voice raised from a whisper to a shout. “Does. Nothing. On. This. Fucking! Island! Make! Fucking! SENSE!”

SENSE!

Sense!

Sense.

‘ense.

-se.

Her voice echoed across the enormous lake, over and over.

The rest of the group glared at her, but she glared back. She was sick of this nonsense.

Massive bears? She could deal with that.

Ants the size of an eighteen-wheeler? Squish them like all other bugs.

Rotting dogs that look like fucking dinosaurs? Nightmare fuel, but manageable.

But why the fuck was water red? And glowing!

Was nothing sacred in this damn hell hole? Even the water was deadly!

For a tense moment, nobody moved, afraid that the unstable woman had alerted something to their presence and they’d need to flee.

There was a response, but it came from an unexpected and welcome source.

“’ello,” a raspy voice called out in a Russian accent. “Someone there?”

The squad looked around wildly for the source of the voice, not seeing anyone. Taskmaster found it first.

“’own here,” the voice rasped out again before descending into a coughing fit.

“Down there!” He said, pointing to a pile of rubble jutting out from the red water.

It looked like a part of the cavern wall had collapsed, taking part of their ledge down with it. The group could barely make out a tiny hole in the wall and a pallid face looking up at them.

“Got it,” Gavel said, levelling his hammer in the direction of the rubble and pulling the stone toward him, then he banished it toward the lake. After a few boulders were cleared, the Suicide squad saw four bodies.

One was still moving, the man who had called out to them, his body thin and his skin sallow. His legs had been crushed by the rubble. He stared up at them with bloodshot eyes.

The other three soldiers were dead, one with a hole in his skull. That same body was also undressed, and parts of it were missing.

Deathstroke didn’t even blink at the sight.

You did what you had to survive.

“Bring him up,” the mercenary told Gavel, who pulled the man toward them with a frown.

“’merican?” The cannibal asked softly, his voice was weak, but his eyes were alive and active with a frantic energy. “’ave water? Out.” He coughed harder this time. Blood flecking his lips.

Thanks to Spiral being able to teleport, the Suicide Squad didn’t have to worry about supplies, so Gavel passed the man his canteen, which he drank greedily from.

“We’re not American,” Slade said in Russian. Killer Frost and Gavel looked at him in confusion, but Taskmaster nodded. “Mercenaries. We want to leave this Island. How’d you get here?”

“Followed orders,” the soldier replied in his mother tongue, head twisting this way and that, never staying still. “We need to find the source, ack-ack, of the dragon’s power. Followed Powersurge to explore, and, cough, we found these caves. Dragon Koschei collapsed the path.”

His breathing was laboured, and he coughed intermittently, but his words made Slade frown.

A dragon zombie?

“Where is the Koschei,” he asked. Taskmaster was providing a translation to the others.

“There,” the Russian nodded toward the red lake, eyes flickering to everyone in the group for a moment before moving on in a flash. “Massive thing. Would have killed us all if not for Powersurge.”

“Did Powersurge kill it?”

“No,” the man bit out, teeth clenching and bloodshot eyes glaring at nothing. “His armour was too strong for it. He would have killed it. But it got him. It got him. Got him. Killed him. Ate him. Opened his armour like a can of tuna and ate him. Wants to eat me. Won’t let it. I’ll win. I’ll live.”

“What ate him? The Koschei?”

The Russian continued to glare at nothing, pupils dilated in fear and refusing to answer as his eyes scanned the red lake.

Slade decided that answer could wait for now. Whatever had killed Powersurge had done so over a week ago, before they had even landed on the island. It hadn’t killed this soldier either, so it was long gone.

More critical was getting as much information as possible from the clearly unstable man.

“You came on a ship?” He asked, and the soldier nodded, taking another sip of water. His eyes continued to dart around, never staying in one place. “If you take us to it and help us, we will get you off this Island. We have a portal.”

Deathstroke was taking a calculated risk, telling the man about the portal. It was a good bet, though. A man like this, who had done the things he did, would be willing to do almost anything to survive and escape.

If the man betrayed them, it’s not like they couldn’t kill him immediately.

“That way,” the soldier said immediately, desperately, pointing to the other side of the rubble where another cave was. His eyes, so scared a moment ago, were wild with hope now and even more frantic. “We came in through there. You will bring me with you, or Fantasma will not believe you and attack. I’ll explain what happened to her.”

With their current group, Slade thought they could take on a bunch of soldiers and Fantasma, a Russian magician, with little trouble.

No need to tell him that.

“Spiral,” he ordered the six-armed mutant. “Heal him. He’ll lead us to his ship.”

The Ziz bomb gyrated in her dance, and slowly, the man’s crushed legs started to realign. With hesitant hope, the man sat up and slowly rose.

“Thank you,” he said in broken english as he stared at the mutant.

He doubled over, coughing again, but managed to get his breathing under control after a second and drained the rest of the flask of water before passing it back to Gavel with a grateful nod.

“Name is Alexi. Thank you all. It is day to surface, cough,” he told the group in english before switching back to Russian and talking to Deathstroke. “From there, it is three days to the coast and two more to the ship. We will need food, water, and a way to cross this gap. Do not touch to water!”

“Frost,” Slade said simply as he nodded at the missing ledge.

“Yeah, yeah,” the cryokinetic rolled her eyes but did as asked. With a wave of her hand, a bridge of ice connected the gap and gave them passage. The woman frowned.

“Hurry up. The mist dissolves the ice quickly.”

“Let’s go,” Slade ordered, and the rest hurried across the bridge. The mercenary went last, staying behind Alexi as the soldier moved more slowly as warily tested the ice before stepping on it.

Deathstroke was the only one to notice the Russian freeze as he looked up and out across the lake.

“No,” the man whispered in Russian, his voice filled with disbelief. And terror. “NonononononONONONONO.”

“What?” Deathstroke asked, instincts and long experience having him throw himself into action in a moment, putting his back to the wall and palming his weapon.

“You!” Alexi shouted, whirling on Slade in a frenzy. “You did this!”

“Did what!?” Gavel asked, looking around for a threat from the entrance of the other cave, his hammer raised and ready to strike. “The fuck you talking about?”

“It toys, it bats, it plays, but I know. I know.” The disturbed soldier babbled in Russian, stepping away from the group.

“He’s crazy,” Killer Frost said though she, too, was surveying the surroundings wearily. “The Ruskies have all their soldiers doped up on something. He probably hasn’t slept in days. He’s seeing things.”

“Calm down, Alexi,” Slade spoke in Russian, his voice authoritative. “Come with us. You will leave the island. You’ll live. But only if you come with us.”

“Live?” Alexi asked, giggling madly. Then he doubled over, coughing, hacking, and spewing blood. Teeth fell from his mouth and clattered noisily on the ice. “Ack! That’s what it wants. You run and run and run and run and hide and cry and hide. It likes that.” His eyes, wild and mad, stared at them, then deeper into the mists over the lake. He continued to back away from them. “Nobody lives. Nobody leaves. We’re going to die. We’re dead. You don’t know it. Already dead.”

Alexi threw himself backward and over the edge.

The fall wasn’t long, only a few feet to the red water.

The water wasn’t deep either, and Alexi stood in the waist-deep liquid, arms wide in triumph.

His skin bubbled and twisted, pustules growing and bursting in moments.

“I did it!” He crowed, a broad smile on his face. His clothes bubbled and hissed as they dissolved. “I finally did it!” The meat from his thighs and legs floated to the water’s surface as it disintegrated. “I win! I win! You can’t have me. You wanted me but can’t have me!”

Hair fell from his head in a rain as his face melted, cheeks, lips, and eyes sloughing off

in a disgusting slurry of blood, muscle, and meat.

“I win, Bayun!” The soldier laughed joyfully as his organs fell from his torso with a ‘plop’ as they met the red water.

Alexi kept laughing for the five seconds it took between touching the Lake of Rot and turning into Putrid Corpse.

The Suicide Squad was long gone, fleeing down the passage toward the surface.

Alexi had killed a comrade, eaten his body, and drank his blood in order to preserve his life. For days, he had been trapped with no hope of escape but had never used his gun to end the pain. He had been willing to work with unknown mercenaries without question if it meant escaping alive.

They did not want to stay around anything that could drive a man so desperate to survive to commit suicide in such a gruesome fashion.

Half a mile from the tunnel entrance, sitting atop the boney head of a Dragonkin Soldier, with her round paws tucked under her like a loaf of bread, Medea tilted her head cutely.

What was that about?

Ultimately, the cat(?) closed her eyes and returned to sleep. Unlike the one in the power armour from last week, she hadn’t wanted to eat that guy anyway.

Rot left a weird aftertaste.

Medea debated eating another one now. Only the big one would fill her stomach, so the others were just for fun and flavour.

The cat(?) decided against it for the moment.

She was still digesting the other one.

And Medea wanted to watch them squirm.

But first, nap time.

Author's Note:

Aren't cats just the cutest?

Glad to finally be able to get back to Tsunade. Her character is one of the ones who would change the most in this situation. A combination of her maturity, experiences, and shitty luck with men, means that if, after everything that goes down in Naruto, her dreams are once again betrayed, I can see her spiralling into another self-destructive depression.

Enter Yoruichi the rebound. Lively, smart, sexual, playful Yoruichi. The perfect woman to get her started to pull her out of that funk.

Enter Mikael, who is going through something similar.

One of the things I struggled with in Volume 1 was what to include and what not to. I put a lot of thought into which moments were most important to who.

Tsunade's chapter, Isolation 1, was one of my favourites as I think it encapsulates her and Mikael best. At the core, they are both characters dealt shitty hands who must learn to push on despite it.

I am glad I can write more about her in the future.

Certain women get more screen time than others by the very nature of going to certain worlds. Obviously, the comic characters have more interactions in the comic world. So I enjoy the chance to write the others whenever I can. They will be more prominent in Volume 3 but still have parts in 2.

I'll see you all next week.

PROBATION IV

You know there ain't no rest for the wicked
Money don't grow on trees
We got bills to pay
We got mouths to feed
There ain't nothing in this world for free
I know we can't slow down
We can't hold back, though you know, we wish we could
Oh no, there ain't no rest for the wicked
Until we close our eyes for good

"Blergh."

The sound of vomiting filled the night air, overwhelming any noise of insects or night birds.

Taskmaster didn't miss a beat as he cleaned his weapons. Both spears had been covered in blood, fat, and viscera after their most recent run-in with the wildlife of the Elden Lord's island.

Whoever thought it was a good idea to crossbreed a frog with a manta ray needed to be shot. In the head. Twice.

"Blargh," Gavel vomited again.

The massive man couldn't keep this meal down either.

Taskmaster was glad he was vomiting downstream this time and had the sense to follow the stream a ways away from their camp. The water would wash away most of the stink in a few minutes.

"Ack, ack, cough, bleurgh."

Based on experience from the last few days, Gavel would vomit for another five minutes before stopping.

The coughing wouldn't stop.

"He's dying," Deathstroke said quietly.

Taskmaster nodded, not denying the words or the implications.

The question was, should they leave him behind?

"We're going too slow," his fellow mercenary continued. "We should have been at the ocean yesterday. If we keep stopping for him, we'll waste more time."

"He's still useful," Taskmaster said. "More so now than before."

Deathstroke reluctantly nodded.

By now, they were all familiar with each other's abilities, and Gavel's unique

invincibility was no exception. It capped the amount of damage he could receive at any point.

Since getting sick, the former vigilante had not gotten so much as a scratch.

On the outside.

Who knew what his insides looked like when he spent hours a day vomiting his stomach contents.

“If he gets worse, we leave him.”

“What is the rush?” Taskmaster asked. “We were lucky to find the Russians. We still have weeks before we use up the portal, even if we assume the last few are traps.”

“A bad feeling.” Deathstroke looked to the night sky, visible above the canopy of their resting place for the night.

Two moons glinted down at them.

The larger one was dark blue and covered in concentric circles of golden runes.

The other was much smaller, overshadowed by its blue counterpart. The typical pale moon of earth hung in the sky as it had for billions of years.

It was the latter and smaller of the pair that Slade Wilson was glaring at.

“We are running out of time,” Deathstroke insisted. “I don’t know why, but our deadline has been shifted. Something is different with this island now. Something in the air.”

“Magic?” Taskmaster asked, looking around warily.

“No,” the other man shook his head. “Just a feeling. Instinct.”

Taskmaster’s hands tightened on his spears. Newbies who trusted ‘gut feelings’ died. Veterans’ instincts, honed after years of survival and bloodshed, were more trustworthy than any mission briefing.

If the greatest mercenary in the world said his instincts were telling him something, you better be prepared to listen.

“We’ll reach the ocean tomorrow morning. We’ll reach the ship in three days if we keep the pace. We may need to fight them. Gavel will be useful.”

Deathstroke didn’t respond, staring at the rising moon in contemplative silence.

Taskmaster wouldn’t be the one to say it, but the squad had been lucky. Despite losing Hookwolf on the first day, they had spent almost two weeks on the island without further losses. It hadn’t been easy, but they had all survived everything the island threw at them.

Once they got the bombs out of their necks, Spiral would teleport them back to the ship, and they’d face whatever was on the other side. The more members of their team that survived till then, the better their chances of escape.

Barring Spiral herself, who’d be useless on the other side, Gavel was the single most

useful member of the team. He'd be the one they'd send in first. Losing him would be a significant hit to any escape attempt.

They just had to hope he'd last that long.

More concerning was whatever the island threw at them next.

Today alone, they had run across no less than three different kinds of boar, and all tried to kill them. Then they had been unlucky enough to enter a ravine where a pair of cyclopedia… things lived.

Taskmaster didn't know what they were, only that they had one eye, yellow tusks, were twice as tall as Gavel and four times as wide, and their hide was tough enough that neither his spears nor Deathstroke's sword did any damage.

They looked like a demented cross between a cyclops and a hippopotamus, with a rhino horn because why the hell not.

Killer Frost was almost killed when one barrelled through her ice and grabbed her. Only Gavel's close proximity saved her from having her head bitten off.

The squad could not keep counting on luck if they wanted to survive.

One slip up, and someone would die.

The tension and the sense of unease were wearing on everyone's nerves. Sleep was hard to come by when you woke at the slightest sound.

Even now, Taskmaster had to decide whether Deathstroke's 'feeling' was due to a long experience in dangerous situations or a paranoia born from having no sense of peace for weeks.

Even the most incredible men in the world made mistakes when they went without rest for so long. He would know.

Taskmaster rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"Where's the mute," Killer Frost asked as she joined the pair around the warm embers of the fire. Gavel walked behind her with a pallid look as he climbed the little outcropping that led to the shallow cave.

"Sent her off for this week's delivery," Deathstroke said plainly, not taking his eyes off the pale moon. "Something boring and uninteresting. I want them guessing."

"Anything would be boring after crystal lizards that eat metal and fire-breathing insects with six legs and four arms," Gavel snorted. Then he started coughing again. Killer Frost gently touched his arm as he covered his mouth. Gavel didn't react, but he did manage to get his breathing under control. "What is she sending through?"

"Some of the boars we ran into," Taskmaster answered. He didn't care if the pair were fucking, hated each other, or had a whirlwind romance. So long as they were useful, he'd keep them around.

If they weren't…

"Which ones?" Killer Frost asked with sardonic humour in her voice. "The small and violent ones? The big and violent ones? Or the fucking big and violent ones?"

"All boars are violent," Taskmaster sighed. "Not just those on this island. We just told her to grab a few and shove them through. Compared to everything else, a few pigs with no special abilities will not be what they seek. They'll be eager for the next delivery. Won't blow us up in the meantime."

"And the next delivery is my fist to their groin," Frost smirked, punching a fist into her palm.

"Ideally," Taskmaster nodded but didn't say anything more.

"Anyway," Frost continued. "I call dibs on the first watch."

"I'll, ack, take second, cough. Cough cough."

"I'll take last then," Taskmaster rolled his eyes as he stood up. God save him from horny idiots. Gavel was clearly sick, and they were still going at it? Morons. "Once Spiral is back, have her set up inside the cave. Otherwise, she'll jus-"

"Something's there!"

Deathstroke's interruption was not loud, barely a whisper, but they all heard it clearly.

In less than a second, his spears were in his hands. Killer Frost and Gavel were back to back and watching the night as they shuffled toward where the man's massive hammer lay. This was not the first time their 'camp' was invaded by some nocturnal creature.

Taskmaster bit back a groan. They'd have to find a new place to set up after this. The blood of whatever was here would attract more predators.

Sleep was still far off.

They heard them before they saw them.

Clack.

The clacking, shuffling, and grinding of bones against one another were initially quiet as the first things shuffled out of the forest on bone-thin legs.

Clack, crack.

Then ten more followed the first. Each was a dark shadow in the night, their thin bodies only slightly illuminated by the moons' light.

Clack, crack, clack, crack.

Behind those ten were fifty more.

Clack, crack, clack, crack, clack, crack, clack, crack.

Skeletons.

Clack, crack, clack, crack, clack, crack, clack, crack, clack, crack, clack, crack, clack,

crack, clack, crack.

Hundreds of them exited the forest in lockstep, shambling their way toward the mouth of the small cave the group had chosen as their resting place for the night. The squad watched them, despair setting in as more emerged from the trees' cover.

Clack, crack, clack, crack.

They weren't human.

There were too few ribs, each shaped like a dragon's fang. The bones were too sharp. Instead of skulls, the spine was connected to jaws filled with razor-sharp teeth. Teeth that clacked, ground, and chomped at the air as if hungering for the flesh of the living.

Clackcrackclackcrackclackcrackclackcrackclackcrackclackcrackclackcrackclackcracclackcrackcla

"What the fuck?" Killer Frost asked in a horrified whisper.

Hundreds of undead were filling the space between the cliff and the forest, drawing closer to their camp. They were all armed with bone weapons. Swords. Spears. Daggers. Bows.

"Wall!" Deathstroke ordered sharply, stepping back into the shallow cave.

The ice was almost too late.

Crack!

Taskmaster stared, wide-eyed at the bone arrow inches from his face.

His spears were raised to block it. Even if he succeeded, he would have been riddled with holes from the dozens of other bone missiles.

More arrows were hitting the ice, wedging themselves in deeply even as Killer Frost made the wall thicker and thicker.

"We need to break through," Deathstroke said quickly. "We're surrounded."

"How?" The cryokinetic asked, a note of hysteria in her voice. "I don't know if you noticed the fucking army of fucked up skeletons outside!"

"We can't, erghem, wait here," Gavel said with a slight cough, laying a hand on the woman's shoulder to calm her. Killer Frost's wide eyes stared up at the man for a second before taking a deep breath and nodding. "They came from, ack. From the forest."

"They are not natural," Taskmaster realized. "We would have heard them coming sooner. Like that ghost snail a few days ago. We kill whatever is summoning them, and they'll disappear."

"We'll follow you," Deathstroke nodded at the Australian vigilante. "Once we're in the middle of them, the archers will lose line of sight. Frost, you're on defence. We'll cover you."

“What, cough, about the daft bint?”

“She’ll be back any minute. Either we’ve killed the summoner by then, she helps, or she shows up in the middle of them, and she’s a distraction. Keep an eye out for her, but our priority is exiting the encirclement.”

The Suicide shared a determined nod.

With a deep breath to calm herself once more, Killer Frost destroyed the ice wall by exploding it outwards.

Dozens of warriors tumbled away as shards of ice, feet thick, blasted them to pieces.

Gavel was right behind, smashing a skeleton warrior with a bone sword like he was hitting a golf ball. He extended his invulnerability to his hammer and, through it, to the skeleton.

Like a bowling ball, the undead warrior crashed with a disastrous force, knocking its compatriots back and clearing a hole in the line Gavel charged through. Killer Frost was at his back, already freezing a dozen arrows out of the air.

Within seconds, the hole in the lines of the undead was filled with more clacking, biting, and crushing foes.

The nearest skeleton tried to smash its bone blade through Taskmaster’s skull. He blocked, staggering slightly from the unexpected strength of the undead, but managed to hold it off with one of his spears. The other severed its spine.

Gavel’s hammer swung in a wide arc, destroying ten skeletons with one swing and sending bone shards flying through the air. The man coughed, pausing in his stride momentarily before pushing forward, a one-man wrecking ball. He carved through the horde like a buzzsaw.

Killer Frost was more focused on defence, raising walls of ice above their head to prevent the unending rain of arrows from turning them into porcupines. Whenever Gavel paused to catch his breath or cough, she took the brief pause in their push forward to send icebergs the size of houses into the army of fanged foes. Her attacks were infrequent, but each destroyed or froze dozens with their vast area.

In contrast, Deathstroke was a picture of measured efficiency. His every move put him just out of reach of an enemy’s swing. Every time he swung his blade, a bone warrior lost a limb or had its spine severed. He killed fewer than the previous two, but he did it with such an economy of movement and energy that it looked like he was walking through a busy crowd on a subway rather than fighting an army of the undead.

Taskmaster didn’t have Deathstroke’s pure efficiency. Didn’t have Gavel’s strength, invulnerability, or Killer Frost’s ability to affect a wide area.

Taskmaster wasn’t a Super, not a mutant, not an alien, or a product of some genetic

experiment.

Taskmaster was one hundred percent, baseline human.

His one ability stemmed not from any supernatural phenomenon but from his memory. All he could do was recreate the movements of those he had seen. He didn't gain their strength or superhuman abilities. He just copied their movements and learned from them.

This made him a famous and deadly mercenary that had tangled with the multiple PRT teams such as the Avengers or Titans, vigilantes like Spider-man, and other Supers.

Then he had the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Taskmaster hadn't even known The Flash was in town before he was in a cell.

He languished in prison for years, waiting for his chance.

Then he was offered to come to this island in exchange for freedom. Despite knowing the mysterious benefactors would betray him, he accepted the deal rather than continue to rot away.

And they unknowingly made Taskmaster so much deadlier than he had ever been.

After they planted the bomb in his neck but before they had been shipped to the island, the organization gave them all footage of all known associates of the Elden Lord so they knew who to avoid to remain covert.

Including images of *her*.

Scathach.

A mythological warrior-queen.

A woman who had trained heroes.

A woman who had fought an army of demons on camera for over an hour.

A woman whose most significant advantage wasn't her ability to summon spears, cast magic, or other superhuman abilities.

A woman who had carved her myth through pure skill.

Skill Taskmaster could replicate.

Certainly, he'd never be able to do everything Scathach did. She had so many more tools at her disposal than he did, to say nothing of the difference in physical parameters.

But what he could replicate was enough.

Enough that he didn't need to copy Deathstroke.

Enough that with his two spears, he could dance through the dead.

In a brutal whirlwind of bladed death, Taskmaster tore through the horde of skeletons. His movements were fluid, unending as one blow flowed into the next into the next into the next. Even when he dodged, blocked or parried, it only furthered his goals.

Any blow blocked was used to push him back to a more advantageous position. A

parried blade crashed into another skeleton. By dodging, he placed one bone warrior in the path of others.

Taskmaster wasn't their squad's strongest, smartest, most experienced or toughest.

But he was the most skilled.

It saved his life.

The squad had made it to the treeline. Despite killing hundreds of undead, they were being blocked by hundreds more. The trees limited how many could attack at once and provided more cover from the rain of arrows, giving Killer Frost more chances to attack. It also restricted the squad's movement and line of sight as the moons' light struggled to filter through the thick overhead branches.

Skeletal fragments flew around the Suicide Squad in such numbers and density that it looked like they were trapped in a snowstorm of bone. Their movements, familiar with each other from the long weeks of survival on the inhospitable island, were seamless as they wove through and around each other.

They moved with brutal efficiency deeper into the forest, eyes peeled for any sign of the summoner.

The attack should have killed him.

The blade was less than a foot from his throat when the moonlight glinted off it.

Pure skill saved Taskmaster at that moment.

He didn't have time to think, dodge, or call out to his companions. All he had was human reflexes.

And the muscle memory of one of the greatest heroines to ever live.

His right spear, extended to destroy a bone warrior with two daggers, was too far for him to pull back and block.

Taskmaster stepped into the attack as his arm moved without conscious thought. The haft lightly nudged the arm holding the curved blade.

Blood flew through the air.

"Aaaarrrrggg!" Taskmaster screamed in pain, throwing himself backwards. Despite the pain, he swung his spear in an arc.

The figure nimbly backstepped, just outside his spear's reach, before darting forward. They came in quick and low, their dark clothes blending in with the shadows of the night.

The movements of a trained assassin.

Taskmaster, bleeding from his lost ear, unbalanced and in pain, should have died then, his copied skills only saving his life for the briefest of seconds.

If he was alone.

Ice rained from the sky in chunks, and the cloaked figure was forced to dodge in

between skeletons to avoid being crushed by the frozen blocks.

"You good?" Killer Frost called out. One side heard it as a shout. The other was barely cognizant of the sound.

"I'll live," Taskmaster bit out in pain. Losing an ear was terrible because of the blood loss and the disorientation caused by imbalance. It was better than having his neck slit. If they could kill the summoner and Spiral returned, she could heal him. Even in pain, his eyes followed the cloaked figure as they moved through the undead horde in an arc. "I found them!"

The mercenary needn't have called out. Gavel was already barrelling down on the figure, his hammer destroying another wide swath of undead. He missed the figure as they ducked and weaved through the trees, blinking in and out of existence.

"Hold still," the vigilante called as he battered down a tree, his swing unslowed. "This will only hurt, cough, a bit. Then it'll hurt, ack, a lot."

The figure remained silent, nimbly backing away from every wide swing of the hammer. Killer Frost tried to rain more ice down, but the canopy of trees provided enough cover for them to avoid any damage.

Deathstroke emerged from behind a nearby tree, blade swinging to decapitate them.

They managed to duck out of the way but lost their cloak as the sword caught it in its arc. The figure slipped from the entangled clothe with the ease of long practice, regaining their footing.

Taskmaster finally got a good look at his would-be killer.

Chestnut brown hair fell to her shoulders, and one eye observed the squad. She crouched, ready for the next clash, as her curved blade glinted with a golden glow.

Taskmaster recognized her from the videos.

Melina.

They had been found by the Elden Lord.

Deathstroke shot her in the head.

This entire trip, he had been conserving the limited ammo on the ship. Most things they faced on the island would ignore bullets if they hit at all. Either too big, too tough or came in such numbers that a few shots would not have made a dent.

Now that he had a clear target, he took his chance.

Like all things the mercenary did, his movements were refined to perfection. There was no pause in his movements as he withdrew his pistol and blasted the woman.

He hit her in the forehead.

Melina staggered back.

The bullet fell to the ground.

A forcefield of yellow light rippled around the impact zone, less than an inch from her skin, before disappearing. Melina's one open eye landed narrowed in annoyance.

Deathstroke shot her again.

This time, the woman dodged.

With supernatural grace and dexterity, she backflipped out of the way of his bullet and Gavel's hammer as it swung down behind her. The giant was forced to turn his weapons as more undead tried to pile on him and Frost, leaving the woman unmolested.

A golden flame lit her blade as she swung it in an arc, sending it in a wave at the mercenary. The ice that rose to block the gold fire slowed it slightly as the energy carved through the wall. Deathstroke dove out of the way in time to avoid being bisected.

Taskmaster's spear caught the woman in the back while she hung in midair, driving her to the ground. The same forcefield of energy prevented him from drawing blood.

Melina rolled along the ground, uncaring for the dirt that stained her clothes, as she shot to her feet and lunged.

"Freeze her!"

Melina's lunge brought her right to Taskmaster. Ducking under another spear thrust, she coiled up and around him like a snake, plunging her dagger down into his throat.

Then she stopped, frozen in place. Her blade pierced his skin and drew blood, but not deep enough to kill.

Taskmaster saw Spiral withdraw her hand, her order fulfilled.

He was still wrapped by the paralyzed woman, one arm unable to bend, but the other lanced up with spear in hand.

"Ατλας!"

The air pressure solidified around the pair, and Taskmaster's thrust froze, unable to move an inch as the air locked him in an invisible prison.

"Teleport us away!" Deathstroke ordered.

Purple light bloomed in the sky, circles of magic covering the canopy.

Taskmaster watched with wide eyes, unable to move, as rays of purple magic lanced down with murderous intent.

BOOOOM!

Like an artillery bombardment, the magic crashed all over the forest, upending trees, dirt, stone, and skeleton. Over and over, the magic crashed down in the woods around the frozen pair, reducing the landscape to rubble.

Then the explosions stopped, and the purple glow of the dozen magic circles faded, leaving the paralyzed pair amid a billowing cloud of dirt and debris.

For a few seconds, the forest was tranquil.

It had been less than a minute since Melina first appeared, and the situation had changed dramatically.

"Rule Breaker!" A voice called out from the dust cloud.

Melina fell, no longer paralyzed, from atop Taskmaster.

The mercenary remained trapped by the cage of air pressure.

"Did you get them?" Melina asked as she rose to her feet.

"No," the same voice responded. It was female and frustrated, but Taskmaster could not see her from his angle. "The other four got away. What were you thinking?"

"We can ignore them," Melina ignored the question, brushing the dirt off herself. "They aren't who we are looking for either. Let's move on to the next group."

Taskmaster felt his hope grow. If the Elden Lord's women weren't here for them, there was a chance they'd let him go. Or he could trade information or services in exchange for clemency. He was a handy man to have around.

"I've followed your little whim for long enough," the unknown woman said sternly. Melina "We are not going anywhere until you tell me what this is about."

"We do not have time," Melina said with a frown, looking behind Taskmaster. "I will tell you later."

"If you want me to keep teleporting you around, you will tell me now."

Taskmaster hoped this argument continued. Whatever was distracting them or pressing them for time was good for him. They would have killed him, helpless as he was, if they wanted him dead. That he was still alive meant he still had use. He still had some leverage.

The longer they argued, the more time they wasted, the better chance the spell holding him would wear off.

Taskmaster had no thoughts about trying to take them both on after that display of magic, but he wanted to escape if possible. Once he snuck away, he'd cauterize his ear and make his way north. He knew where the squad was going, and he'd make better time by himself so he would catch up.

These women just needed to stay distracted and keep ignoring him.

He'd live.

He'd survive.

He'd get off this damned island.

"Why did you attack them?" The unknown woman asked, insistent. "My Dragon Tooth Warriors were drawing them in. They were almost at my statues."

"They were taking too long and being dealt with too easily," Melina said plainly, stepping closer to the figure and out of Taskmaster's line of sight. "We weren't forcing

them into a corner fast enough."

"Why are you in such a rush?"

"Because we need to find the Death user immediately."

"Why? Mikael will find them when he brings them into the Dream. Why all this effort? You could have been killed if I wasn't here! For no reason!"

In pain from his wound, Taskmaster was occupied by listening to the argument between two women who held his life in their hands, and contemplating his escape, he almost missed the two glowing eyes in the dark.

Almost.

Taskmaster struggle redoubled in a frantic effort.

He grunted, tried to scream, tried to flail, anything at all to draw the women's attention. Crying, heaving, and praying for anything to save him.

Neither woman noticed as death approached Taskmaster on softly padded paws.

******

Medea was trying to remain calm. She really was.

She still wanted to strangle this woman's pretty little neck.

Would it kill her to not be vague?

Would it kill her to answer the damn question?

If she didn't, Medea would definitely kill this little…

The greek witch took a deep breath, getting herself under control.

"My Lord should not create another Dream," Melina answered.

"Why," Medea asked again, unwilling to let a non-answer like that stop her.

"Becau-"

Melina's words were cut off as the moon started to glow a blood red, bathing the torn forest in its pale blood glow.

"Looks like you are too late," the greek said with some vindictive pleasure. "Might as well tell me now."

Melina continued to stare up at the red moon, her expression unreadable.

Then she sagged in relief as the bloody glow in the night faded once more, leaving behind the regular moon after only a few seconds.

Medea frowned, now genuinely worried as the kindling maiden seemed to deflate, tension leaving her form.

"What is going on, Melina? Why would him starting another Dream be bad?"

"It is not the Dream that is the worry," the maiden shook her head. "It is the mindset

that it requires that worries me so. Any of his more… inhuman abilities require a shift in thought."

"Didn't you help him hunt down and eat dragon hearts so he could assume dragonic forms?" Medea arched a brow. "That is hardly a human thing to do. I'm not human. Diana, Ranni, Raven, Yoruichi, and Priscilla are all not human. I did not know that was a problem."

"Your race is irrelevant, as is my Lord's," Melina shook her head again. "Whether he be dragon, man, or abomination, I would love him the same. What I speak of is his mind. Have you not noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

Melina frowned and looked away, staring at the moon again in thought.

"Perhaps I need to speak to Lady Ranni," the kindling maiden whispered to herself. "Perhaps only those who knew him well before can notice the change?"

Oh no, this bitch didn't just say that.

Rage, cold and calculated, filled Medea.

"What do you know of Servants?" Medea asked, her voice conversational. As if she was asking about the weather.

"I fail to see why that is important at the moment," Melina said. "We should meet with my Lord to discuss what he discovered."

"Humour me."

"Very well," Melina nodded. "Most of my knowledge comes from you and the occasional talk with my Lord. I know that you are figures of myth made real. Heroes of legend that ascended to the Throne of Heroes to be recorded through history as Heroic Spirits. Heroic Spirits are forces of nature, supremely powerful but rarely appearing. Servants are those Heroic Spirits forced into a class container, such as your Caster class. This limits their abilities but makes it possible to summon them. Most often, this is to compete in a Holy Grail War for a wish. That is my understanding. What does it matter?"

"You have the basics," Medea nodded. "What you didn't mention was that Servants, and their Noble Phantasms, are the crystallizations of their legends."

"I had heard of that," Melina agreed, but her tone suggested she didn't understand the point.

"What you don't *get*," Medea bit out the last word. "Is those legends are cyclical. Repeatable. Stories are told over and over again. Servants are dead things. The dead cannot change the world. Not because we have no abilities or we don't impact those around us, but because we, as legends made real, are trapped in our own stories."

"I do not understand."

“Through fate, luck, cosmic coincidence, or whatever you want to call it, Servants tend to repeat aspects of their legends when summoned. It is our greatest strength and weakness. Gilgamesh will be the greatest, but his arrogance will be his undoing. Leonidas will be placed in a situation where he must sacrifice himself in a position to defend against an overwhelming foe, buying time for others to win the war as he loses the battle and his life. Diarmuid of the Love Spot will meet his end because of a jealous husband, even though he is innocent. Medea of Colchis will fall in love, but the man will choose another woman over her.”

“Oh…” Melina said softly, meeting the Demigod’s eyes. “I see.”

“Do you?” Medea asked harshly. “Do you really? I did everything. Everything! I helped him with his experiments. I fed the other his blood for weeks without them knowing at his request. I unified a harem of women for him. I was the first to tell him of my love. I am the one who worked tirelessly on countless methods of pulling him from his prison. Emma might have been the most trusted, but I was the most useful. And he used me and left me for another woman. Just like Jason.”

“That is unfair,” Melina denied. “I do not deny your aid or your feelings, nor the feeling of betrayal my existence brought, but you cannot claim my Lord is like your former husband. He repeatedly told you he was unable to reciprocate your feelings. He never once led you on. Any of you. Just because you love someone does not mean they are forced to love you.”

“Oh, I know,” Medea nodded, a vicious smirk on her face. “But feelings do not care about logic. All I could see was my past repeating itself. I might have still loved Mikael, but something most forgets about love is that it does not mean it supersedes other emotions. For days between learning of what happened in the Lands Between Ranni and Mikael’s escape, I loved and hated Mikael. And I absolutely despised you. You who had everything I had wanted. You who threw it away.”

“I died for him!” Melina shouted.

“And I couldn’t even do that!” Medea shouted back. “I could do nothing! Once more, I was a victim of powers higher than myself, unable to determine my own fate.”

The pair of women glared at each other in that ruined forest, each daring the other to make the first move.

Melina was the quicker of the two, and Medea was within reach of her blade. Medea was the most destructive. If the first blow didn’t kill her, which it wouldn’t with her Aura and Haki, she’d bombard Melina from on high.

Neither moved.

Then Medea took a deep breath.

“I was planning on killing you,” the greek witch admitted softly. “When we found you in his room. I knew right away who you were. It would have been easy with everyone else crowding around him.”

“Why didn’t you?” Melina asked, her glare still there but less harsh. “I wasn’t bound yet. My Lord might not have been able to bring me back.”

“It wasn’t pity. It wasn’t fear or hesitation. At that moment, a week after learning of your existence and everything that happened in the Lands Between, I was still consumed by my emotions. Only one thing stopped me from killing you in revenge.”

“Mikael stopped you?”

“No,” Medea shook her head. “Do you know what his first he said after landing on the Island and finding you? It was ‘Medea’.”

“So he did stop you.”

“He wasn’t even talking to me,” the greek witch denied with a smirk on her lips. “He was talking to his cat. The cat that he named after me. It had jumped on his face when we all woke it up with our arrival. It recognized him even though he was in a completely different body.”

“Why did that stop you?” Melina asked with a tilt of her head, hand leaving the pommel of her blade.

“Because it was absurd! What kind of man names his cat after one of the greatest betrayers of all time?” Medea giggled at the memory. Melina eyed her warily. “Don’t you get it? Mikael is absurd. The situation was absurd. My feelings, hating someone who had done me no wrong and who had given me the greatest gift, were absurd. It wasn’t like you chose your situation, and Mikael certainly didn’t plan for everything that happened. Yes, him falling in love with you after rejecting our feelings was terrible. Yes, we are all jealous of you.”

Melina froze.

“But if he hadn’t?” Medea continued seriously. “If Mikael continued to stubbornly reject everyone? Not only would he have never been freed, but he would never have been able to accept anyone else in his heart. I, who had schemed for so long to build him this Family, forgot the primary goal of it. In Artoria’s words, in losing a battle to a third force, I had lost sight of our war aims. Which were to make sure he didn’t leave us behind. You are the one that achieved that goal, and killing you would have destroyed it. That fat cat saved your life and this entire Family.”

Medea couldn’t help but giggle at the thought. Her life was absurd, and she wouldn’t have it any other way. But she had a point to make.

“Since then, I’ve done my best to be accommodating, friendly, and helpful,” Medea

continued. “When you asked for my help tonight, I gave it without question. We’ve been at this for hours, and I’ve stopped you only when you almost died. I might not have decades with Mikael like you, but I care about him and this Family. I am owed at least an explanation if something threatens it. Your dismissal of the rest of our feelings will not do you any favours with me or the other if you keep wishing for our aid.”

“I see,” Melina repeated with eyes slightly wide. While not to the degree of Raven, the woman was not too expressive and generally hard to read. Right now, she looked like Medea had just told her the most shocking thing in the world. “You were jealous? Of me?”

“That is what you got out of that?” Medea asked, incredulously throwing her hands up in the air in frustration. “Yes, you moron. We all were. Still are. If someone cares for their partner, they’ll be jealous of the person who spent decades with them. That is common sense!”

“But I am jealous of you.”

Medea froze, hands still hanging in the air, falling limply to her side.

“I may have spent the most time with him, but I am by far the most useless,” Melina admitted with a grimace. “I showed him how to channel runes once. Fought with him once. And died for him once. That is it. That is all I have done, all I can do. I am the weakest on this island. My skills are the least useful. Unlike you, who he relies on more than any other, I am nothing more than a memory. A bad one. I am an outsider with no purpose. My Lord tells me to live for him, for the Family, but I do not know how to do that. What is my purpose when you all are so much more capable?”

Melina met her eyes, not with a glare but with a look that was at once envious as it was helplessly lost.

“I meant no insult to you when I asked if you hadn’t noticed a change in my Lord,” Melina said. “I simply worried it might be my imagination. If Lady Ranni noticed the change, I would have confirmation of my worries, and I could bring them forward. I may be of some use then. If she did not, it must be because I have been gone from my Lord too long and do not understand him as well as I thought.”

Even after meeting Melina, Medea had not forgotten her anger, her jealousy, for the woman. She played nice for the Family, but even months later, those feelings still simmered deep within her. It was why she lashed out at Melina’s words.

Medea wouldn’t apologize. She did not regret any of her actions, and her feelings were valid.

“What are these changes you are worried about?” The greek witch asked softly.

But she could make peace.

“As I said, it is when my Lord employs his abilities from the world after mine.

Bloodborne, I believe it was called." Melina replied, accepting the peace offering. She looked to the sky. "He was not there long, weeks rather than years, but it affected him. He doesn't speak of those days. All his other worlds, he will joke or tell tales of. When I bring up that one, he deflects. And he gets this look on his face when he uses his 'GOO' powers, as he calls them. Like all emotion or personality has bled from him."

"I thought he was just learning to use those abilities since he had less time to practice than others," Medea answered, knowing the look Melina was talking about.

"I have seen him practicing spells before," Melina shook her head. "He spent a year in Raya Lucaria pouring over tomes and learning all he could. That is not his study face. His study face is one of intense focus, and he will occasionally stick his tongue out between his mouth if he is particularly determined."

"Like his cat?" Medea asked in disbelief, imagining Mikael pouring over books with the tip of his tongue sticking out in what he called 'blep-face' when his cat did the same in her sleep.

"Exactly," Melina nodded.

Medea felt the familiar pang of jealousy. She had never noticed that habit of his. She knew the kindling maiden wasn't doing it on purpose, but it was stuff like this that made her and the others jealous. What other habits were they unaware of?

"It is an entirely different expression to the one when he manipulates his eldritch abilities," Melina continued. "That expression is one I recognized as when he was in his worst moods. Not anger, but apathy. When the weight of the years and his curse would get to him. He'd retreat inward, acting as if a machine. Hours, sometimes days, would pass. When I could, I would draw him from the trap of his mind, but I was not always able to right away."

"We'd have noticed if Mikael went unresponsive for days," Medea frowned.

"It is not the same," Melina shook her head again. "The expression is, but the situation is different. When we travelled together, such a mood was not common. In four decades together, he fell inward only a dozen times."

"But it's much more common now," Medea nodded, understanding the maiden's conundrum. "Even if it's shorter, if it happens regularly, it could mean something is wrong. And you say it happens when he uses his abilities from Bloodborne?"

"That has been my observation," Melina nodded. "I hope to stop him from using them as much as possible."

"It's too late tonight," Medea said, looking up at the white moon. "But talk to Ranni about it. I'll ask Raven if she's noticed anything similar. She's the one who spends the most time around him."

“His Shadow would know,” Melina nodded. “Ask her about when he gives ‘treats’ to his pet and thinks we do not notice. That is the most common time he uses his abilities.”

“Alright,” Medea agreed, aware of her husband’s habit of spoiling his cat. Not that she blamed him. She spoiled it as well. “We should head back and find out what he discovered. He also will know where the group left to and might want to deal with them.”

“What group?” Mikael asked, appearing in a shimmer of starlight. Both women jumped in, surprised, and he grinned.

“Every day, I curse Ranni for teaching you teleportation,” Medea muttered.

“But then you taught me your version as well? I wouldn’t be able to do it this quickly without your lessons. That doesn’t sound very clever of you, oh Witch of Betrayal.”

Melina glared at Medea, and her ears reddened in embarrassment.

“How was I supposed to know he’d start teleporting everywhere to surprise people?” Medea defended herself.

“Because he is Mikael,” Melina said, using his name rather than the usual title for emphasis.

Mikael grinned, completely unrepentant.

“Why did I marry you again?” Medea asked, putting a hand to her forehead in exasperation. “You are not even my type.”

“Because I am pretty,” Mikael responded instantly, batting his eyelashes and flicking his hand through his hair in an exaggerated huff. “I am your trophy husband. You only want me for my body. Admit it. I’m just a meat dildo to you all, aren’t I?”

Melina facepalmed.

“Must you be so crass, my Lord?”

“Yes,” Mikael grinned. “Anyway, what group were you talking about?”

“Four people managed to teleport away,” Medea said, not mentioning that they had almost seriously injured Melina. They hadn’t even really scratched her, so there was no point in worrying him. “One with six arms, one woman, two men-”

“One huge and the other covered in armour and a mask? Yeah, I saw them. Gavel, Killer Frost, Spiral, and Deathstroke,” Mikael nodded in recognition. “They’re about four miles north of here. They landed in a hive of Gravekeeper Scorpions. They aren’t having a good night. Though, I am surprised they managed to get away from you two.”

“We caught one,” Medea said. “After we get info out of him, I want to try to grow Glintstone again. I am this close to finding out why they make those ‘mage balls’.”

“Oh, you caught someone,” Mikael said innocently. Too innocent. Both women narrowed their eyes at him. “Where is he? How come I don’t see him?”

Melina let out a long sigh.

“He’s right…” Medea turned to point at the man trapped in her spell, only he wasn’t there. “Medea!” She shouted in shock as she caught sight of the tubby cat sitting where the man had been, licking her paws and grooming herself.

Mikael burst out laughing as the cat gave them all the side eye before continuing its self-care.

“What has Mommy told you about eating her test subjects,” the greek witch stomped toward the fury creature. “Bad girl!” Medea held Medea up by the scruff of her neck, and the fat cat’s body hung like a limp noodle as tiny wings beat fruitlessly for freedom.

“Mrow?” The cat(?) whined piteously at her, eyes wide and wet.

Medea caved instantly.

Mikael laughed harder.

“Ok, you’ll get off this time since I hadn’t started any experiments on him. But next time, Mommy will cut you off. No more leftovers.”

“Meow,” the cat(?) agreed? Or close enough that Medea let Medea go.

Its too-small wings carried it over to the still giggling Mikael and landed on his shoulders, rubbing against his head affectionately. He started scratching the thing below her chin.

Then he tried to sneak her a ‘treat’.

Subtly, he formed a tentacle in the palm of his hand.

Medea bit off the new appendage, eating it with glee, her tiny cheeks stuffed with his flesh.

When he stopped giving the cat(?) scritches, there was no indication of any wound on his palm.

He looked to the pair sharing a concerned look, and smiled guilelessly at them.

“What?” He asked innocently before starting to rub his face affectionately against the beast. “She’s best floof. Yes you are. Yes you are. Who’s my little glutton? You are, you big tub of adorable lard.”

He knew that they knew he was sneaking Medea treats, but so what? He’d spoil Fat Floof forever.

“Nothing,” Medea answered, not mentioning the brief look that had appeared on his face for a moment. “Did you discover what Priscilla was sensing?”

“Yep,” he nodded, popping the ‘p’. “I also found that other thing Tsunade sensed. Both are strong but nowhere near worth worry. A few of us can deal with it. I’ll explain everything back home. I was just coming to pick you two up, since everyone else is there.”

“Very well,” Melina nodded and approached him to grab his arm.

Medea almost did as well, then she froze as a thought came to her.

“You said you were aware of everything during the Dream?”

“Yeah,” Mikael nodded, tilting his head in question at her. “What do you want to know? There are still a few large groups on the Island if you need more test subjects. The Chinese just sent three more ships. You’d think they’d learn after the first five.”

“It was the same last time? You watched everything?”

“You asking about your private time?” He grinned. “I saw it all. You are one naughty witch.”

“Not that!” Medea denied, her face a deathly white. She wasn’t embarrassed. She was afraid. “After Ranni arrived while you were in Bloodborne…” She couldn’t say it.

“Oh,” Mikael nodded in realization. “You mean when you destroyed your workshop, spent hours turning the training field into ruins, and cursed my name while describing, in excruciating detail, what you’d do to me? I never saw any of that. My favourite definitely wasn’t when you said you’d give me magical diabetes just to force-feed me my own pancreas. That would be insane.”

“Then you knew…” The greek witch looked between the man and the woman standing side by side.

“You described what you’d do to Melina if she was still around enough times that I got the hint,” Mikael deadpanned with a roll of his eyes.

“Then why didn’t you stop me! Say something to me!”

“Stop you?” Mikael asked, bewildered. “You never did anything.”

“I was going to,” Medea insisted.

“But you didn’t,” Mikael drawled slowly as if speaking to a particularly dumb animal. Medea would have been insulted if she wasn’t so confused and afraid. “Really, I don’t see what the problem is. I’ve thought about killing my friends and Family a bunch of times. We make each other mad. That’s how Family works.” He paused for a second before giving a grudging nod. “To be fair to you, what I did was pretty shitty. I had my reasons, but I still hurt you all with my actions. You especially, given your circumstances. I haven’t apologized for that, have I?”

“I don’t want your apologies,” Medea denied emphatically. Even when she was angry at him, she understood his actions. If she could have found love away from Jason, she would have in a heartbeat. “I want to know why you never brought it up. Why you never stopped me from getting near her.”

Melina, who had been watching this interaction with interest, also looked at Mikael.

He shrugged.

“I trusted you.”

Melina facepalmed.

Medea felt like she'd been punched in the gut.

"Wha… But my legend?"

"What about it?" Mikael asked casually. "You aren't Medea, the Witch of Betrayal. You are Medea. My wife. If I don't trust you now, after everything you've done for me, I'd be an idiot."

"But I could have hurt her," Medea pointed at Melina. "I was planning on it."

"Nah," Mikael waived her off casually. "Being jealous of her, angry with her, even hating her. Those are all valid and understandable, given our situation. Even hating me, I get it. When I chose the lures instead of any form of control, I knew that loving someone did not preclude them from hating me either. Dragon aura might help positive feelings develop, but it doesn't stop negative ones. And I wouldn't want it to. You had every right to those feelings. But hurting her? You'd never do that."

"How can you say that?"

"Because you are the only person who loves this Family, the whole Family, as much as me. You would never do anything that could tear it apart." Mikael shrugged again. "Actions, not words, prove it. You are the one we all go to, rely on, and who never turns anyone away. We all trust you, and you've never given us a reason not to. Medea, General of Love is a better title for you any day of the week."

The witch stared at him with wide eyes, ignoring his last sentence with the practice of a woman well used to her husband teasing her.

Medea liked reticent men of sincerity, those with few words but each with meaning. She disliked muscles and preferred a slim build.

Her ideal type was the exact opposite of Mikael.

But when he said stuff like this…

Mikael might not be her type, but gods be damned, did she love this man, this Family.

Author's Note:

And another one bites the dust.

I love getting the chance to explore these characters, their interactions, conflicts, and growths while advancing the main plot. Even in a 'harem,' it doesn't mean everyone gets along. Personalities, histories, and goals clash.

My reading of Medea was 'someone who, through circumstance, became what others accused her of being.' She always has the potential to be a 'good witch,' if you'll pardon the pun. We know this from FGO, Today's Menu, Ataraxia, and other media. Mikael, with his unique brand of trust/paranoia and unwillingness to mind control people, presses all her buttons.

On the other hand, my reading of Melina has always been 'a character searching for purpose.' She isn't weak-willed or impressionable. Otherwise, she wouldn't be so firm in her opposition to the Three Fingers or her dedication to hunting the Lord of Chaos down. Instead, she is decisive but lost. Always searching for the meaning of her existence.

I have plans for both of them and everyone else in the Family.

On the subject of the Suicide Squad, we'll continue to follow their journey, and that of our adorable murder floof, next time, as well as finding out what Mikael discovered.

I'll see you next time.

PROBATION V

'Cause this ship's going down
All on account of the weather
Though we'll drown
There's no need to frown
'Cause we're all going together
And I won't say "Woe is me"
As I disappear into the sea
Oh hell!
'Cause you've all been so good to me
So we're all going together.

Sir Mikael, I have the utmost confidence in you," Artoria stared at me, her eyes focused and unwavering. "Your strength of character and strength of arm are beyond reproach. Though I know you have committed dishonourable acts, they were for honourable goals, and I know the extent you go to to ensure the safety of the innocent and this Family."

The King of Knights met my eyes with resolution but also sadness.

"So why? Why this? Why now? Why must you not only sully your image in my heart but betray me in such a cruel fashion?"

I was stone.

Unshaken, even if the sky fell upon my head, I was stone.

I met her resolute gaze with one of my own, unwilling and unable to back down from this most important of battles.

"Answer me!" Artoria demanded, her face contorting in a way that had never been directed my way. Hurt. Sadness. "After all this, I owed an answer! So, please. Sir Mikael. Why?"

Everyone in the room held their breath, waiting for my answer.

Answer that was as cruel as it was true.

"Because it's funny," I said softly.

Artoria stared intently at me, unable to accept the answer, for it was incomplete. That was not what she wanted to hear.

"And," I paused for dramatic effect.

The tension in the room skyrocketed.

"Mashed potatoes are the best potatoes."

Artoria recoiled as if slapped, eyes watering as they looked from me to her plate and the pillowy mounds that lay upon it.

"Pfft," Yoruichi couldn't hold it in anymore as she collapsed into giggles. Other

women at the table also stifled their laughter.

"They are as soft as clouds," I continued with utmost seriousness, driving the point further into the King of Knight's heart. "White and pure, their pillowy grace reminds the eater of a soft pillow or a woman's bosom. Covered in gravy, with peel, mixed with cheese or bacon, or innumerable other contents, the infinite permutations and ways to eat the mashed potato are a reflection of the nature of the universe. Unending, yet encompasing all. Mashed potatoes are… love."

"Hahahahahaha," Yoruichi was leaning on Tsunade as she shook while Robin wasn't even trying to cover her laughter.

"Lies!" Artoria tried to deny the truth as her hand slammed into the table. "Mashed potatoes are only for those too unskilled in cooking. They are gruel, fit for pigs and soldiers who have no choice and no skill at hunting or foraging. The fry is the superior potato. Crispy on the outside, soft on the inside. Its salty taste goes with so many dipping sauces you are spoiled for choice."

"I've always preferred a solid baked potato," Emma said, cutting her steak with elegant motions. I saw her smile slightly at the 'potato war'. Despite everything, I was happy she was having fun. The awkwardness between us did not mean she was not part of the Family. "There is an elegance in its simplicity. One tuber can become so much, yet its base form is already delicious."

"Chips," Priscilla said simply.

"All valid opinions," I nodded gregariously. "All wrong, of course. But valid. I accept you all, despite your obvious flaws, for I love you. And I know, one day, you too will recognize the mashed way as the only true road to enlightenment."

As always, it was Melina that got under my skin.

"I want to try those 'scalloped potatoes' you mentioned once," she said guilelessly.

"You shut your heathen mouth, wench!" I said in an over-the-top manner so she knew not to take my words too seriously. I know she was doing this to get a rise out of me, but some things were too far. "I will not have that kind of talk in my house! Any who would dare create that abomination in my kitchen shall be sent to the dungeon!"

"We have a dungeon?" Wonder Woman asked softly to Glynda.

The teacher choked slightly on her wine.

"Ugh," she coughed, dabbing at her lips before answering. "We have two. One is the facility where we keep Medea's patients anesthetized. He calls it a dungeon because it's locked from the outside in case any wake up somehow. And he's a drama queen. The other is for… personal use." The teacher's face was tinged a light pink that had nothing to do with wine.

“Oh,” Wonder Woman said softly, fiddling with her bracers contemplatively. Her face was also starting to flush. “I see.”

Damn, I had been hoping to surprise her with it. Baring Emma, Diana spent the least time on the Island, so I had given it good odds she wouldn’t have noticed us repurposing one of the many rooms in the cliff for a sex dungeon.

“What are scalloped potatoes?” Ranni asked.

“They are filth!”

“After he ate some of Torrent’s raisins, I asked him if there was anything he wouldn’t eat,” the great betrayer explained softly. “His answer was, and I quote, ‘I’ll try everything once. If someone cooks for me, I’ll eat it because they worked hard for me. Except for scalloped potatoes. Anyone who puts that in front of me must burn in the fires of hell!’”

“But what are they?”

“FILTH!” I repeatedly insisted.

“A side dish made of sliced potatoes in cream and covered in cheese,” Medea, the resident chef, answered simply as she deftly blocked Artoria’s attempts to slide her mashed potatoes onto her plate.

The King of Knights pouted, looking around for another ‘victim’.

“What is wrong with them?”

“They are a monument to our sins! Proof that mankind is inherently an agent of chaos and destruction. Proof that there is no just god!”

“I honestly don’t know,” Melina answered, ignoring me with the ease of long practice. “I just know it is the one thing he refuses to eat. I’ve seen him consume some genuinely vile stuff.”

“You go for years without being able to taste food, and you’ll be an epicurean, too,” I interjected.

“He’s made salade out of Miranda Flowers, which are poisonous or grilled the Land Octopi.” Melina moved her plate without looking. Artoria pouted harder. I don’t think anyone else had a problem with mashed potatoes since they had all eaten theirs without complaint. They just found her desperation funny, like me. “He once made a broth out of a skeletal snail. It killed him.”

Half the table looked at me.

I shrugged.

“It didn’t taste bad,” I answered the unasked question. “A bit bland, if anything. I think what actually killed me was the other stuff in the soup. Could be the Ghost Glovewort. Could be the Deathbird. Don’t know, really. I had been going for a whole ‘death draught’ thing.”

“You’ll eat something called ‘deathbird’ but not scalloped potatoes?” Raven asked neutrally. Not judgemental, just genuinely curious.

“The Deathbird had the same texture as chicken, only blander,” I shrugged again. “I’ve been meaning to try it and a few other things again now that I have the defences and don’t have to worry about being poisoned or cursed.”

Seeing as they were still curious about the scalloped potatoes thing, I decided to be frank.

“It’s a pavlovian response from my time before the Cell. I had a bad experience with them when I was still human,” I pretended not to see Emma’s fist curl, “and now the sight and smell of scalloped potatoes are enough to make me nauseous. I have yet to find another food that does the same. I wasn’t joking about the taste thing, either. With Faery Feast, almost anything can be used to make good food, so I went wild in the Lands Between. Being undead sucks.”

“T’is that why thy art such a letch?” Ranni asked in realization. “A lack of physical pleasure for years?”

“No. I am just a horny pervert.”

“Pfffttt,” Yoruichi sprayed out her sake at my deadpan delivery of the fact, even as Tsunade gave me the stink eye and Raven, the unfortunate victim, waved her hand. The alcohol disappeared in an instant. The Demon Lord didn’t even blink.

I grinned.

Shame?

What is that?

Can I sleep with it?

Artoria, the cunning strategist that she was, had found the perfect target to foist her unwanted food onto and was holding her plate under the table as surreptitiously as she could.

Medea consumed the mashed potatoes, looking like a cat eating ice cream with the way she licked and licked. After less than ten seconds, my pet licked the last of the small meal from the tip of her nose in an adorably cross-eyed manner.

I seriously doubted eating potatoes would harm her, considering some of the things I’ve seen her eat. Honestly, I had no idea what she was, thus, I always thought of her as a ‘cat(?)’.

My nearest guess was ‘Tsathoggua but cat shaped’.

It didn’t really matter. I loved the floofball all the same.

Looking around up from under the table and around at my Family, my grin slipped into a more genuine smile.

Everyone was laughing, talking, eating, and enjoying themselves.

With the difference in time zones, our busy lives, different projects, heroes, villains, and hobbies, we rarely got the chance to sit all together for a meal. The fourteen of us together filled me with satisfaction like almost nothing else.

If this was real.

I shook the thought from my head once more.

This was not the Cell.

This was not the Kiln.

I was free.

This was real.

“I don’t think he gets to say it is his kitchen because he cooked once,” Medea was saying to Artoria.

“I agree,” she nodded like a chicken pecking the ground. “Not only does he not get to call the holy- the kitchen his, he should never cook again. Ever. Who knows what other sacrilege he will commit.”

I grinned again, tuning out their complaints to focus on another conversation.

“I do not mind if you wish to film your training,” Scathach agreed with Priscilla. “Is it for review after? That is a good idea, now that I think about it.”

“Nay,” the crossbreed shook her head. “My fans have expressed interest in my exercise. I saw no harm in it but did not wish to violate thy privacy and seek thy permission before I post.”

“Hm,” the celt hummed in thought. “I don’t care about privacy, but the tactics are the problem. I don’t think releasing our training images is a good idea. It shows potential foes our weaknesses.”

“Perhaps simple exercise videos then,” Priscilla wondered allowed.

“Don’t,” Emma interjected, her tone firm but kind. “I’ve been keeping track of your image on social media and your streams. A large part of why you are so popular is the mystery of who you are and what you do. Keep singing, keep playing games. Feel free to talk to your fans, but keep any answers about your home life, past, or Family vague.”

“I believed we were beyond the need for secrecy?” Priscilla frowned in question.

“We are,” the White Queen nodded. “This isn’t about keeping our abilities secret, though Scathach is correct. This is about managing your image. Your fame is explosive after Mikael’s interview a few weeks ago. We want to capitalize on that. The public now considers you a ‘princess in the painting’ or other such titles. All they have in common is a proper, aristocratic, peaceful image. A woman of innocence and love who is discovering more about the modern world through video games and music. We want to preserve this,

at least for now, if you still want to start a singing career."

I nodded at Emma's words and the hidden reason we didn't want her to release such footage.

No degenerate netizens will be getting off to my floofy dragon exercising if I can help it!

As a dirty netizen myself, I knew exactly what was going through their filthy little minds.

"What of my appearance?" Priscilla asked. "My viewers have complained about my robes at length. Are they as archaic as they claim?"

"Ignore them for now," Emma insisted after sharing a look with me. "It is actually better for you to keep the same uniform. When we get you on stage, it will make your difference in appearance all the more appealing."

Not only do they want to see her exercise, but they also want her in revealing clothes? Indeed, humanity was a mistake.

Priscilla wasn't naive and knew more about life's harshness than most, but she was in unfamiliar territory. Grail Knowledge gave her basic information on using computers and the internet, but it didn't go in depth.

It was like knowing porn existed as an abstract concept but not understanding how much was out there or how widespread it was. Or what some people could get off to.

By the time the perverts of the internet really got going, I planned on having an army of lawyers at hand to ensure my floofy dragon stayed floofy.

"I shall do thee as recommended," Priscilla nodded obediently. "When shall that be? I find myself quite nervous yet excited at the prospect."

"Still a while," Emma shook her head. "Stuff like this takes time. We want to capitalize on the novelty of our arrival, but we want to do it right if you want to have any staying power. Speaking of," Emma looked down at the table at me. "Have you heard of the Memorial Gala?"

"No," I shook my head after finishing chewing. "Should I have?"

"It's a fundraising auction for Endbringer victims around the world. It's held in New York. Some top-tier heroes are invited, but so is anyone who donates something of significant worth to be auctioned off. Tony Stark started it after the Behemoth attacked, and it is one of the largest gatherings of the rich and powerful in the world. Frost International is naturally one of the donators."

"You don't say," I grinned hungrily, and the mutant's smirk was just as hungry as mine.

For a second, Emma and I were of the same mind again. Just like we had been for

those first decades, planning and conspiring. The two of us worked hand in hand to ensure everyone got their happy ending.

Then I remembered what I had unknowingly done to her.

I remembered her 'betrayal'.

I remembered our goals were currently opposed, even if she followed my lead.

My grin slipped as the awkwardness returned.

Emma looked away, sipping her wine.

"Anyone else have news we should know about?" I asked, looking around the table.

Everyone had finished their meal except Artoria, who was diligently eating her fourth steak. She had ensured the bowl of mashed potatoes was on the other side of the table so I couldn't slip some onto her plate again when she wasn't looking.

One day I would convert her to their pillowy ways.

"Strange hasn't done anything strange," Yoruichi reported dully.

"The tensions with the League are mostly gone," Diana went next. "A few are still suspicious but will work with us. Most are relaxing around us and recognize we are trying to help. My counterpart, in particular, has been very helpful. She would like to talk to you again when you can."

"I'll pop in at some point," I grinned.

"Please don't."

"Too late!" I looked around again. "Anything else?"

"I've been travelling around Africa," Scathach said.

"Am I going to get complaints about you overthrowing a nation?" I asked in exasperation.

Thanks to the likes of the Justice League, Africa was far from as bad as it was in Worm, thanks to the lack of S-class threats. In fact, many nations were quite prosperous, to say nothing of states like Wakanda. But, part of the problem with being backed by the UN was that the international team of heroes could only step in if they had reasons for sanction, such as a threat to, or crimes against, humanity.

Thus, many smaller nations were still ruled by military dictatorships, only with Supers instead of tanks and guns. So long as they toed the line and kept their international image, they could rule without outside intervention.

"Not that I am aware of," Scathach answered. That did not fill me with confidence. "I slew a few minor warlords, but that is it. A few of the fights were well coordinated. They were possibly backed by larger nations."

"So long as we have plausible deniability, you're good. Have fun, dear."

I continued looking around the room, but when nobody brought anything else up, I

decided to get to the main subject I wanted to discuss tonight.

"For those who haven't heard, Priscilla recently felt something off on the Island. She said it was as strong as Diana but felt like death," I nodded at the crossbreed and then at Tsunade. "Tsunade was unable to sense it through the plants of the Island, but she also noticed something else off. An hour ago, I started another Dream to discover what was happening. To make a long story short, our net caught some big fish."

"Who is it this time?" Glynda asked with a long weary sigh.

"As of the moment, I dropped the Dream, there were 1256 invaders on the Island," I recounted. "Some more have probably died since. I counted fifteen that could be considered Supers of varying strength. Three of which were the recent escapees from the Birdcage."

"That is good," Diana let out a relieved sigh. "We received notice of the breakout a few days ago. The League has been hunting for them ever since. We cannot let them run rampant again."

"Feel free to tell the League they can stop looking. They can't escape, I double-checked," I nodded. "We can ignore Gavel. He's got the Rot. He's a dead man walking, even if he has a few other Supers with him. The other two, Swamp Thing and Glaistig Uaine, are travelling alone. Those two are who Tsunade and Priscilla, respectively, felt. The question is, why are they here?"

"Are they also here for the 'source of your power'?" Robin asked dryly.

I had only learned about this recently, but when I had been on my way to Earth, there had been a big meeting about the 'Lord of Chaos'. And it was the source of a bunch of my problems.

If I could travel back in time efficiently, I'd go back and kick Dr. Fate and Green Lantern in the crotch. Their words about the Jewel being a 'power source' or 'tether' had given people stupid ideas. Followed by my repeated insistence that 'the Island is a deathtrap, don't go there', some dumbasses thought I was trying to 'protect my power' or some other bullshit.

The majority of invaders were from governments of one kind or another who had seen the UN records of the meeting. Once they learned the requirement for getting through the Jewel was being a piece of shit and wanting to hurt my Family and me, they loaded up their most dickish soldiers and sent them on their way. They each had some sort of 'escape', either through magic or technology, but none of it would work for them.

Oh, it all worked just fine, just not for them. They had to literally pass through my Jewel to enter my dimension. Obviously, I would mark them. By now, I had quite a collection of portals, amulets, charms, or other things that would teleport me to the

invaders' bases, landing zones, or wherever they were connected to.

One of these days, I should use some of them to troll their home countries.

"I don't know which would be worse, that they are stupid enough to believe that, or they have some other purpose," I sighed. "I never understood that in stories. If someone puts up a flashing neon sign that says, 'Certain death here!' why do people go there?"

"Human curiosity is dangerous," Robin said, and I gave her a nod of acknowledgement. If anyone knew that, it was her.

"Thy are making a mistake, my Lord Husband," Ranni cautioned, and I looked to her. "Thy assumption is that their minds are as great as yours, that they might comprehend the greater nature of the world. T'is why I sought to have Order at a great remove, to guard it against such knaves."

"As a rule of thumb, I always assume someone plotting against me is as smart or smarter," I shrugged. "If I am wrong, I am pleasantly surprised."

"You shouldn't," Tsunade interjected. "Overestimating an opponent can be just as deadly as underestimating them. I cannot count the number of enemy ninja that lost when they could have won because they were scared of 'one of the sannin'."

"Doing so in battle leads to hesitation," Scathach reminded, sipping her mead.

"There is also the difference in priorities," Artoria added. "An enemy general might have different conditions of victory than yours. A villain might think taking a town hostage is rational, even if we know it to be foolish."

"Difference in access to accurate intelligence is a key factor," Yoruichi also chimed in. "The Island is a black hole. What comes in never leaves. They know nothing. We know pretty much everything on this side. They will make plans with that faulty information."

"Alright, alright, I get it," I held my hands up in playful surrender. "No need to gang up on me. Sometimes people will be dumb. I get it. I still want to know why, upon escaping from Earth's most heavily guarded and specialized prison, they all thought it was a good idea to travel across North America, grab a boat, and sail to the nearby deathtrap. Separately to boot. They can't all be dumb."

"What were they doing?" Artoria asked seriously.

"The Faerie Queen is leading her little army eastward, and Gavel's team is headed north along the coast. Swamp Thing is being a vegetable." Almost the entire table groaned at my pun, Raven even sparing me a glare. I smiled smugly. Their hatred filled my heart with warmth. "By that, I mean he's not moving. He keeps to one place, forming and dissolving his body to merge with the plants nearby."

"All three must have some sort of goal," Medea looked thoughtfully at me. "And it cannot favour us, or they would not have been able to cross the barrier."

“I cannot speak to Gavel or this Faerie Queen, but Alec was a fine hero in my world,” Diana answered. “He had his troubles but was no maniac as he is in this one. It is possible this Swamp Thing is not him, as I understand that the name is something of a title given to the champion of the Green.”

“I plan on keeping an eye on them for a few days,” I said. “There aren’t a lot of Supers out there who can survive on the Island for long, but Glaistig Uaine and an Avatar of the Green would do it. That’s one of the reasons I called everyone here tonight. While in the Dream, I cannot pilot my avatar, so I will be gone for a few days.”

“No.”

“Hm?” I looked at Melina in confusion at her firm denial. “What’s wrong with that plan? It’s just a separate layer of consciousness superimposed on reality. I’m not actually leaving. If you need to talk to me, you can just call my name on the Island, and I’ll pull you in to talk. Unless you want to spend the entire time in there with me?”

“I believe she means there is no need for you to begin another Dream,” Medea answered after sharing a quick look with Melina. I was happy they were getting along, but I still needed clarification about where the problem was with my plan. “I am more than capable of scrying on them or using familiars to follow them.”

“That won’t help with Swamp Thing,” I pointed out. “You won’t be able to sense if he does anything weird. I can.”

“Tsunade will watch him.” The former Hokage frowned at Emma for volunteering her. “She wants the practice with her Element and new techniques.” Tsunade’s frown lessened as she gave the idea some thought.

“That’s two people doing a job I can do alone,” I raised a brow. “Seems inefficient. But if you want to…”

“It would be good practice,” Tsunade nodded.

“You are busier than most of us,” Medea continued. “It’s more efficient, not less, if we do it this way.”

“Fine, fine,” I shrugged, waving her off. “It’s not like it was something I was looking forward to. Just make sure to let me know when they do something strange.”

“What if they don’t,” Robin asked. “Do anything strange, I mean.”

“What, they came to death-island to live out their Gulliver’s Travels fantasies,” I asked sardonically. “If that’s the case, let ‘em. They can only cross the southern mountain range by breaking the boundary field first. Unlike the outside, I’ll just blast them with my real body if they do. Hell, if she wanted, Priscilla could probably solo them both. She’s pretty much their perfect counter. It’s curiosity, not fear, this time.”

I might be a self-styled coward, but that was due to necessity from the knowledge that

there were bigger fish in the ocean than me. I wasn't afraid of even S-class threats, let alone ones whose powers I knew and had plans for.

If you weren't capable of planetary levels of destruction, at the minimum, or conceptual attacks, then you couldn't do anything to me when I had access to my main body.

I was wary of Swamp Thing and the Faerie Queen, not because they were a threat, but because I didn't know what they wanted. Their initial goal had to be malicious, or they would not have been able to come in, but that might have changed. They were the only ones so far who wouldn't be killed by the flora and fauna of the Island, so they were the only ones I had to give some thought to.

Maybe they came here to slay a dragon, found out they liked it here, and decided to settle down. I doubted it, though.

I truly could not care less what they did, so long as they didn't cross the southern range. My Island was just that big.

The whole 'invasion' was just so inconsequential to me now.

Medea and I had initially set up the spell to allow assholes onto the Island because we needed some volunteers for projects to get me a body. Medea would still grab one occasionally, but that was less than a dozen, even after almost two months.

We kept it going only because we might as well use it to capture some dangerous Supers. We didn't even have to do anything. If they could survive on the Island, as unlikely as it was, they were serving their sentence for any crimes they committed. If they died, it wasn't our fault. I had repeatedly warned everyone how deadly the Island was.

Suicide by Island was responsible for the death of over twenty villains, not counting a third of the estimated manpower of the Endbringer cultists, the Fallen.

Just by sitting in the ocean and opening the door, I was single-handedly responsible for more 'arrests' than most PRT teams made in a year, all without lifting a claw.

Neither Diana nor Artoria, the most 'moral' of my Family, had a problem with the current setup. Hell, the latter's entire myth was based on a king rising up to defend the isles of Britain from invaders. It wasn't like we were inviting them in. Anyone who entered was literally scum who brought it on themselves.

The biggest concern anyone had was about Medea's experiments, but the greek witch had been as humane as possible. Just because she occasionally needed a human body didn't mean it always had to be alive. Or if it did, that meant that the subject was required to feel pain.

This was the first time we had someone of concern show up in almost two months. And it was two of them at the same time to boot.

I gave Gavel a week before he puked his lungs out.

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“I don’t like this,” Slade whispered, looking over the hill they were lying on and down to the Russian ship.

The abandoned Russian ship.

“I’ve seen prisons that look more inviting than that thing,” Killer Frost ‘agreed’.

“There is too much of a mess for them to have abandoned it in an orderly fashion,” Slade continued.

He didn’t have enhanced vision, but the knocked-over tents, fortifications, and other emplacements in the camp beside the ship suggested a fight. They had a clear line of sight thanks to the soldiers removing all plants and trees in a hundred-meter radius around their landing zone. The barren land indicated the camp had been there for a while, as even the grass was gone, thanks to the trampling of footprints and a few craters from explosions.

There was just one problem.

“Where are the bodies?”

“They weren’t eaten,” Slade answered as he continued to survey the barren area for any threats. “Unless they were swallowed whole, there would be blood everywhere. If something could do that, we would have seen tracks. I’m only seeing human footprints.”

“Could those skeletons a few days ago have been them?”

“Possibly, but I don’t think so. That is miles away.” The mercenary continued to stare at the scene for a few quiet moments before recognizing the futility of the action. He wouldn’t be learning anything more from here. “Let’s rejoin the others. Be on guard. With any luck, we will be off the island by nightfall.”

“Thank fucking god,” Killer Frost said softly as they crawled back down the hill.

Spiral and Gavel were a ten-minute walk back, each ‘watching’ the other. The former was the same as always, unmoving unless directed, but the latter was measurably worse after the last few days. Every breath was a wheezing rasp instead of a deep rumble. Every time he coughed, blood mixed with his saliva. He was keeping his words to a minimum now.

He could still move and fight, thanks to Spiral regularly healing him, but he’d die if they didn’t find a way to cure him soon. Or got him to a trained medical professional.

Slade was debating whether to leave him behind on the island, as he was almost dead weight by now, or if it was better to release him upon their backers on the other side of the portal and let them deal with him while he made his escape.

He could decide in a few hours once they had the bombs in their necks removed.

"We'll move slowly," he told the rest after they regrouped. "I don't want anything surprising us from behind. We'll pass through the camp first, then sweep the ship. Only if we don't find anyone in either, and their medical room is intact, do we try to remove the bombs."

"And, cough, if it, ack ack, isn't," Gavel asked between laboured breaths. He was skinny, too skinny. The massive man had wasted away in the week since their encounter with the Russian soldier, leaving him a husk of what he once was. Even now, he was practically leaning on Frost for support.

"We'll have to try anyway," Deathstroke insisted. "We're running out of time. Not just for you, but for all of us. Who knows when they will decide to push the button. Spiral and I can perform the procedure if we have the right equipment."

Slade had been hoping not to count on the Ziz bomb to operate on him, trusting Taskmaster's professionalism more, but he had no other option.

He had not told the others, but after studying Hookwolf's body, he suspected the bombs in their necks were not just remotely activated but on a timer as well. They weren't Tinkertech, and he knew his way around bombs, so he immediately noticed that they would have no way of receiving a detonation signal from another dimension.

It was precisely that lack of Tinkertech that soothed his initial worries that they needed a Thinker or Tinker to perform the operation. He was sure he could remove the devices from his squadmate's neck if he had some scalpels, anesthesia, magnifying equipment, and Spiral on hand to heal.

Then, he'd order Spiral to repeat the procedure on him. Her movements were precise enough that he knew she could do it, even if he didn't like trusting his life to the six-armed woman.

If everything went to plan.

"Let's get going," he ordered, double-checking what remained of his equipment. Hopefully, he could stock up on any supplies the Russians had left behind.

The others nodded seriously.

The previous weeks had removed all of their backtalk, arguing, and sass. The Suicide Squad had seen too much and suffered too much to be the same people they were when they first landed.

The island had changed them, marked and scared them. They'd never be the same.

If they survived.

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The camp was a mess.

Everything was knocked over and filled with holes, and a few tents had been burned to ashes in a fire that had, thankfully, not spread to the rest of the camp.

Empty shell casings and the occasional mark of long-dried blood proved there had been a fight at some point, but there were no marks of animals. Not even scavengers.

Everything was silent and unmoving but for the flapping of torn clothe on the wind and surf upon the shore.

The group of four passed through the base's remains slowly, checking under every tent, opening every container and bag, and ensuring someone was always watching their backs.

Nothing.

They found enough MREs to feed them for a month, enough guns and bullets that Slade could finally be fully armed, and even some heavier ordinance. Gavel decided that he would be the one to carry the RPG since waiving his hammer around was getting harder and harder. With his ability to imbue it with his invincibility, he could even use it as a club.

Of course, nothing was marked with anything that suggested it was state-sponsored by the Russian military, but anyone with a lick of sense would be able to tell that this base was too well organized and funded to be anything less.

All their gains would have made them very happy if the scene wasn't so creepy.

The silence in the air was oppressive, eerie, and foreboding.

Slade would have preferred the piles of bloody corpses under the mountain to this silence. At least then, he knew what he was dealing with.

After an hour of careful search, the remnants of the Suicide Squad were left with one last place to look.

The ship.

It wasn't particularly massive, large enough to carry three or four dozen soldiers and their equipment but not so large that it couldn't enter the little bay the Russians used as cover. The soldiers had built a dock to connect to it, likely with the aid of Powersurge's armour.

More shell casings littered the path to the ship, indicating a fighting retreat but no bodies. The squad took the time to look over the edge of the dock, just in case anything hiding under it, but found nothing.

They reached the ship without incident and climbed aboard the deck to find more of nothing. A few ship guns were the only armaments on the deck facing the island. Likely

what caused the craters around the camp.

Nobody said a word as they looked at each other outside the door to the vessel's interior. Even Gavel's cough was held in as best he could.

Deathstroke opened the door with a creek.

With his new gun at the ready, the mercenary descended into the ship's bowels, followed by the rest of the Suicide Squad.

The vessel creaked and groaned with their passage, every footstep reverberating down the dark metal interior. Their hearts furiously beating in their chests, they swept the ship one room at a time, wary of any sound or movement.

If anything had jumped out at them from the shadows, they might have died of a heart attack.

But no, nothing did.

The bridge, the mess, the cabins, the engine, the hull, the officer quarters, and all other places they searched was void of all life.

Silent as a floating tomb.

Though they all felt a flood of relief when they discovered the med bay, messy but intact, they kept sweeping the ship for anything out of place. They did it twice to ensure nothing was hiding in dark corners to jump out at them. Then they returned to the camp to triple check they weren't being ambushed from land.

Nothing.

Hours after they had first walked into the abandoned camp, the Suicide Squad finally relaxed enough to speak.

"There's nothing here," Killer Frost said, letting off a relieved sigh as she collapsed to a seat on the deck of the ship as the tension left her.

"So it seems," Slade said, still looking around warily. "The ashes from the fires were long cooled. It's been at least a day since it died down. The amount shows a lot of material was burned, which would have lasted a while. Whatever did all this must have already left. It came from the island. That's where the ship's guns fired. Let's do this quickly. Frost, you're first. Gavel, you stay here on watch. If anything approaches, smash your hammer on the deck. We'll hear it from the med bay."

Neither argued, both were determined for this nightmare to end.

It took a bit of time to turn the power back on and then organize the messy med bay, but within the hour, Killer Frost was lying face down on the operating table.

Whoever had installed them had stitched the wounds closed and healed it, leaving only a little scar indicating where he needed to start.

It was with a steady hand that Slade made the first incision in the back of her neck,

right above her shoulders and around her spine. The mercenary was no surgeon or doctor, not like whoever had installed the little bomb, but he did have a sorceress on hand to heal any errors he made.

Not that he made many.

The fundamental truth was the 'operation' wasn't complex. The bombs were impact resistant, so any hits to the head wouldn't set them off. They were also small to not interfere with muscular and spinal movement. As the minutes dragged on and Slade continued his careful work, he realized more and more that these bombs were not designed to provide a viable method of control or even to resist interference.

Whoever made them believed that resisting interference wasn't a problem and that there would be no way for the squad to get the medical help they needed to remove the bombs safely. So they only had basic anti-tampering measures. If someone tried to yank them out forcefully, they'd go off, but that was it.

These bombs were insurance, not a threat like they had initially estimated. They were rugged, hardy, and packed a wallop but would only go off once time ran out or they received a signal. They would last for weeks, then 'BOOM!'

The Suicide Squad was never meant to return.

Slade smiled under his mask.

Their enemies' mistakes were their gain.

The sun had set when Killer Frost woke up from her medically induced sleep. She sat up to the curious sight of Spiral deftly manipulating multiple scalpels and tweezers.

Oddly, she wasn't operating on Deathstroke but on one of those small rabbit/squirrel things they occasionally caught and ate. As the cryokinetic watched, the six-armed mutant performed one of her spell dances and the flesh on the back of the creature's neck reknit over a new, metal addition to its body.

Deathstroke, who had been watching the entire procedure nearby, checked the small creature over.

"What are you doing," Frost asked, still groggy from waking up.

"Making sure she can perform the surgery with only a small prompting," he answered, not surprised that she was awake. "I'm the only one with enough medical knowledge to know if something goes wrong, which won't help if I am unconscious."

"Then stay awake."

"There is no point," he denied. "If it was just pain, I could ignore it, but I cannot see the back of my neck without a specialized setup. It is better to be under if I can't do anything." Satisfied with his inspection and that the creature was still alive, just unconscious, he looked at the mutant. "Now remove it without hurting it or setting off the

bomb."

In a whirl of limbs, blades, and blood, the Ziz bomb went to work.

Killer Frost lay back on the bed she had been moved to, letting her eyes rest.

The blade at her neck was finally gone.

She was free of prison, free of the threat to her life, and soon to be free from the island.

Things were finally looking up.

Twenty minutes later, better rested and clearheaded, the cryokinetic watched Deathstroke be put under for his operation.

Rather than watch, she decided to bring some medication up to Gavel. It was nothing special, just some pain meds, but it would tide him over until Spiral could heal him again.

******

"-KE UP!" A rough shaking roused Slade from his medically induced unconsciousness.

The voice then degenerated into a hacking fit.

Slade was on his feet instantly, his groggy mind regaining focus with every moment as he forced his will to ignore any dizziness.

Gavel was leaning against the wall, coughing blood, but uninjured. Nobody else was in the room with them.

"What is the situation?" Slade asked urgently as he grabbed his weapons and clothes.

"The situation, ack, is you've been asleep, cough cough," the Australian coughed harder before taking a swig from his water canteen. "For four bloody hours."

Four hours. Twice the length the dose should have put him under by.

A miscalculation of the amount? No. Was he just tired? Possibly. Slade was a monster of will, determination, and skill, but he was still a baseline human, and the last few weeks had been hard on them all.

"Frost on watch?" He asked, and Gavel nodded. "It's already late. It will be better to rest and escape in the morning when we are in better condition. We'll teleport back to our ship now, though. Don't want to stay here if we can help it. Where's Spiral?"

"With Frost, mhm. We'll need to grab, urk, some food. All those MREs were bad."

"All of them? They shouldn't have expired yet?" Slade asked as he finished dressing and arming himself.

"Yeah, all of them we tried," Gavel nodded, wiping bloody phlegm from his lips. "Didn't spoil, but they were all filled with dust. Maybe the Ruskies didn't want their guys surviving either."

“Dust?” Slade paused as he made to leave the med bay, his mind racing at the odd occurrence.

Then he connected it to the lack of bodies.

The lack of grass and plant life around the camp.

“Fuck!” Deathstroke allowed himself a rare break of professionalism as he ran from the room. “Fuck! Fuck! We need to leave! Now!”

“What?” Gavel called out, chasing after the dashing man. “Why?”

“I thought something from the island did the Russians in,” Slade explained himself as he ran through the tight corridors of the ship. “But it wasn’t. Someone from the outside did it to get to Fantasma. Then she turned all other organic life to dust.”

“Who? Fantasma? They’re gone. Why do we have to leave now?”

“Because she can sense Supers!” Slade launched himself up the stairs two at a time.

If he had known she was on the island with them, he would have left by himself rather than tag along with the group. It would have been a more challenging trip and less likely to be able to remove the bomb, but he wouldn’t have been spending weeks with the equivalent of bait.

“You mean it’s…”

Deathstroke didn’t hear Gavel’s following words, though he was sure they matched his own as he burst out of the ship and beheld the terrifying sight before him.

“The Faerie Queen,” he whispered in horror.

There were tens of shades of dead Supers upon the deck of the Russian ship, all black and greys but glowing with a green light.

As Gavel arrived, panting and coughing behind Deathstroke, Slade’s eyes noticed three figures he expected and the lack of one other.

Glaistig Uaine was there, looking for all the world like a beautiful young woman out for a midnight stroll with her friends if one were to judge by the compassionate look on her face. Blonde hair and green-eyed, her cloak of black energy swaying in the night air, she was a figure of terror to any who knew of her, despite her enchanting visage.

Behind her stood her greatest warrior, the reason she allowed herself to be captured after getting what she wanted from Gotham.

Solomon Grundy was more terrifying as a shade of black and green energy than he ever was as a zombie.

You could kill a zombie, if temporarily.

You couldn’t kill one of the Faerie Queen’s warriors.

Killer Frost was nowhere to be seen. Not besides Spiral and Glaistig Uaine or among the horde of shades. They all looked exactly as they had in life, so Slade would have

noticed if the cryokinetic was one of them.

Spiral was the same as always, standing in place and unbothered by the army of the undead surrounding her.

“Come, my long weary dancer,” the terror of the Super world said gently. Kindly. “Join our Parliament. Be free of your chains of mind, spirit, and life.”

The Ziz bomb only started to react when the Faerie Queen laid a hand gently on her cheek. Her arms raised, ready to eviscerate the ethereal young woman.

But it was too late.

Spiral fell to the deck with a soft thud. Dead.

Slade knew what was coming and braced himself.

A feeling of weakness assaulted him, almost sending the mercenary to his knees as the wave of energy erupted from the form of the fallen mutant. His stomach roiled and twisted, nausea rising in his gorge, but he forced it down with a force of will.

Gavel, unprepared, fell to the deck coughing and unable to support his weight as the feeling of Decay overcame them. His skin began to flake off, almost revealing the emaciated muscle below, but stopped as his invulnerability kept him alive.

The weak and the dying had no place in Queen’s court.

Only the Dead.

Spiral’s body disintegrated to dust, as did any other organic matter within a hundred-meter radius of the mutant’s remains.

A six-armed figure of black and green energy coalesced from the swirl of dust.

“We welcome a new warrior to our fold,” the delusional Super told her shades. They said nothing. “Welcome her! She will not be the last to join us tonight, to raise arms against the oppressor.”

The Faerie Queen turned her green eyes upon Gavel, lying on the deck coughing behind Slade.

Maybe she would have said something else.

Maybe she would have killed them instantly, bringing Gavel back as another one of her undead soldiers and leaving Deathstroke as dust in the wind.

Slade would never know.

Because that was when the shade of the woman who was once Spiral started screaming.

******

Medea the cat sat atop the bridge, tail swirling about behind her in displeasure as she

looked down on the deck as her lost prey let out a wailing scream.

Her frosty breath fogged the night air as she let out a hiss of anger.

Nobody stole her food.

Nobody.

Author's Note:

Before anyone gets at me about what I got wrong about Ciara, please be aware that I know. Some of you can already guess what's going on, but for others, it will be clearer in Probation's next and last part.

Some of you have caught on to what I am doing with this part of Volume 2. Some have correctly pointed out that Volume 2 is almost like a slice-of-life harem anime. I like to think I can write a bit better than most, but some inherent conceits of the Waifu Catalogue cannot be avoided. Nor do I want to avoid them. After how dark Volume 1 got, I enjoyed the happier and calmer nature of Volume 2.

Those who have read the Overlord light novels might notice I have taken some inspiration from Ainz's situation. An Isekai fantasy is not without consequences if it is well written. The mook bandit the MC kills might have a family. The demons a hero slays might have their own novel-worthy backstory.

My big goal with this part was to show this contrast of the world while advancing the plot.

Yes, this fiction is wish fulfillment for Mikeal and his Family, but that doesn't mean it is the same for everyone else in the world or their presence doesn't have consequences. For every Superman that lived when he should have died, there is Taskmaster who died when he could have lived.

The Suicide Squad are not good people, but they are still people. They still have lives, stories, backgrounds, and special skills. We are more sympathetic to them because I have been writing their journey and hardships, but they are but some of many that don't get a happy end because of Mikael's presence.

The Suicide Squad dies not because Mikael and his Family are evil and they are trying to kill them (though some do lean more that way than others) but because they are not part of their story. A family can laugh around a dinner table while others die because, as cruel as it sounds, we all do that in real life.

It is not evil. It is human.

I'll see you all next week.

SIDE STORY XI:
SITE UNSEEN

Keepin' my mind on a better life
Where happiness is only a heartbeat away
Paradise can it be all I heard it was
I close my eyes and maybe I'm already there
I'll take those long nights, impossible odds
Keepin' my eye to the keyhole
All that to be just what I am
Well I'm gonna be a blue collar man

■

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in, FamilyFloofDragon

You are viewing:

• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

■

♦ Topic: Mutant Attack on Cleaveland

In: Boards ► EMERGENCY ► Ongoing Super Attack ► Cleaveland, Ohio

OhighO (Original Poster)

Posted On Oct 25th 2018:

Mutant attack in Cleveland, Ohio, PRT response failed, heroes dead. Anyone in the area should find a secure shelter and wait for further news. I will update this thread as we know more.

*Edit: Superman managed to get the mutant out of the city. Rescue operations are ongoing in the city while he battles it in less populated areas. Other heroes' responses were delayed for some reason.

*Edit: More heroes have arrived, some X-men, some PRT, and some Justice League. Mutant has biological adaptation. Lethal permission has been given. Fighting continues as

the creature heads east. Nearby towns are being evacuated.

*Edit: Wonder Woman came to aid with fighting the creature. Glory Girl and Panacea came to help. The latter's powers have changed (improved?), and now has a flying brick package. They managed to kill the mutant. It got better. Washington and Metropolis are beginning to evacuate.

*Edit: Two new heroines. One (blonde, armoured, on a horse with a glowing lance. A knight?) held off the mutant for a few minutes, then evacuated the heroes. Possibly magic called out some spell (Bright Engewn?). The other (Wonder Woman's twin? Sister? Clone) took over and is fighting the thing with a bunch of projections and an assortment of weapons. (Testing what it's adapted to already?)

*Edit: It's dead. Finally. The Elden Lord showed up casually, gave Wonder Woman 2.0 a sword that killed it first try. Now he's staring down the heroes. We might have a fight on our hands. I don't think the heroes can win this in the state they are in.

*Edit: Bejesus H. Christ on a pogo stick.

Good news, there doesn't look like there's going to be a fight. One of the Elden Lord's wives just healed the entire northeastern US with a golden tree three times the size of Everest. My scraped leg, stuffed nose, arthritis? All gone. A giant purple dragon just flew over the city and repaired every single pothole in the road and rebuilt the bridge and buildings Doomsday knocked down.

Bad news, the heroes fucked up. Badly. Apparently, the delay in response time was because a huge portion of the heroes who could be called were on the other side of the world setting up an ambush for the Elden Lord while he was eating breakfast with his family. If he wasn't a good guy, married to a version of Wonder Woman and LITERAL KING ARTHUR (who is a hot blonde), then Washington, Metropolis and who knows how many other cities would have been destroyed before Doomsday would have been put down for good.

*Edit: This issue is no longer an emergency. This thread is closed and archived. A separate thread has been created to continue the discussion HERE.

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►Addons

Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

This doesn't look good. I've never seen Superman this beat up. The Flash is stuck doing search and rescue and can't help. The other heores are barely damaging.

►Chrome

Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

This is rough. To anyone in the area, I hope you are safe.

►**SUPERfan** (Super Groupie)
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

They'll get it. You'll see.

►**Addons**
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

It's not that I don't think they can win. It's just at what cost.
A lot of people have died. Heroes as well. It's like a mini-Endbringer.

►**Bruce Lao**
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

I see what you mean. You think it is one? It's not acting like the others.

►**Addons**
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

I don't know. All I know is I feel like shit. The Simurgh is gone, we have our first win against them, then this shit happens. It's like we can't catch a break.

►**Bruce Lao**
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

I feel ya. We just got to hope that the League, the PRT or someone will stop it.

►**Char**
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

Glory Girl! Wonder Woman! They're tough enough that they can take it head on.
Why is Panacea flying thought?

►**SUPERfan** (Super Groupie)
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

They killed it!

►**Realisticlysavage**
Replied On Oct 25th 2018:

It got back up. Even when they kill it, it just heals. Nothing can stop it. We're doomed.
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♦ **Topic: Doomsday Incident Discussion**
In: Boards ► Supers ► Incident Discussions ► Cleaveland, Ohio
OhighO (Original Poster)
Posted On Oct 25th 2018:

Continuation of the Doomsday Incident thread here.
Discussions on power speculation for the Elden Lord and his family HERE.
Before anything else, I just want to say thank you to Melina and Glynda Goodwitch.
My mom would not have survived her injuries without you. If you ever read this, know that the city of Cleveland and everyone else in the US Northeast will never be able to thank you and your family enough.
My heart goes out to everyone who wasn't as lucky as me.
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►**Pastothefuture**
Replied On Oct 26th 2018:

Like, I get it. I am also freaked out by the dragon bigger than most countries sleeping in the ocean nearby after it ate the source of my nightmares, but why didn't they try and talk to him. They apparently had plenty of chances. Instead, they ambushed him at breakfast.
I don't know about you guys, but when a bunch of people in costumes surround me before I've had all six cups of coffee, my response is somewhere between 'fuck off' and 'You all are going to die.'
I'm just glad he showed up when he did. My uncle lives in Metropolis.

►**Notparanoid**

Replied On Oct 26th 2018:

@Pastofthefuture I don't think you do get it.

I agree it's helped us out alot, the Simurgh and now Doomsday, but that doesn't mean it should stay on Earth. If it snores there's going to be a hurricane. I think the heroes are right to be cautious of it. It was clearly lying that whole time. It knew about Doomsday, it probably knew it was going to attack. Then it swooped in and made itself look like a hero.

If anything, I wish Superman and the league hadn't caved so easily.

►**QualityworkR**

Replied On Oct 26th 2018:

Deleted

►**Tinmother** (Moderator)

Replied On Oct 26th 2018:

@QualityworkR Take a temp ban.

We've all lost someone. Keep it civil.

►**Addons**

Replied On Oct 26th 2018:

@Notparanoid While I wouldn't put it like @QualityworkR, I do think he has a point.

Mikael has no reason to help us at all. At any point in time, he can take his Island and leave for any number of planets in the universe. (Or other realities since he would have had to travel to them to marry an alternate version of Wonder Woman.)

Despite all that, he's not only been the only one to kill an Endbringer, but his family has also been helpful. To say nothing about stopping Doomsday (the entire point of this thread) when nobody else could, they then healed LITERALLY EVERYONE and repaired all the damages done and then some.

I hope he never leaves Earth if this keeps up.

►**Answer Key**

Replied On Oct 26th 2018:

Do you know how rare it is for Supers to clean up their messes afterwards? It's practically unheard of except in specific situations. I am not saying it's their fault, most of the time. They try to minimize collateral damage, but once an incident is pacified, they move on to the next.

►**Joshthebossh**

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Fun fact, in the wake of Doomsday's attack on Cleaveland a few days ago, property prices didn't fall, nor did insurance rates rise, unlike in every other incident. It was the exact opposite.

My family and I were nowhere near the disaster, but we were worried about being able to keep our home with the increased rates that were bound to come. We couldn't afford it.

But, thanks to that beautiful purple dragon, property values have skyrocketed, and insurance tanked. Somehow, she managed to fix every problem our building had from miles away. Our leaky faucet isn't even leaky anymore.

HOW?

►**Phildrillman**

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

@Joshthebossh I'm honestly jealous. I lived in Seattle when Magneto did that thing with the meteor. Lost everything but our lives.

It sounds terrible, but for every person that dies or knows someone that does, a hundred more go bankrupt.

►**Notparanoid**

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Again, I am not saying it hasn't done some good, I am just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Nobody with that much power doesn't have some long-term plan. And he is not a nice guy. He literally threatened to skin people on international TV.

►**Threadninja**
Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

After they tried to steal from him. And he didn't, did he?
He's on vacation. His plan involves sleeping in.
…Or not sleeping at all, seeing his wives.
…… I'm not jealous. You are!
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►**Noveltry**
Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Is it wrong that the thing that most stood out to me wasn't the alternate versions of heroes, that King Arthur is a smoking hot blonde woman, that there is a thunder of dragons capable of doing whatever the fuck they want, that the heroes were persecuting a family due to a miscommunication, or that the entire east coast just got the best healthcare?

What stood out to me most was that Elden Lord's harem complimented him into a blushing mess.

We know Mikael is a dork (when he's not being absolutely terrifying), but the second question we must all ask ourselves is:

Is Dragon Jesus a tsundere?

►**Affectionstarved**
Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

My fanfic senses are tingling.

►**Acree** (Super Groupie)
Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

But who do you ship? I mean, they're all together, obviously, but whose OTP. The four-armed blueberry kuudere goddess? The valiant and busty blonde knightess? The amazon? Or one of the others.

►**Ekul**

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Yoruichi Shihouin. No question. Anyone who disagrees is scientifically wrong.

Two words: Cat Girl.

They're all dragons, right? What do you think the others look like? I bet she's a cat dragon.

►**Addons**

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

@Ekul You, my good sir, are wrong. You obviously don't watch Floofdragons Stream. If you've ever heard Priscilla and Mikael sing together, you'd know they are made for each other.

PS: Dragon girls > cat girls.

►**Affectionstarved**

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

@Addons Ah, the classic tale of a bard and a dragon.

Or, in this case, two dragon bards together.

But you are all missing the obvious answer.

Medea.

Not only is she a figure from Earth (hometown represent!) but she was the one to tease him past the point of no return.

And Elf girls are best.

►**OhighO** (Original Poster)

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Ah, the internet.

Come for a serious discussion on an incident that could have ended major cities. Stay for the waifu wars.

BTW: Glynda Goodwitch (is that her real name? Seriously?) is clearly the best. Not only is she tall, incredibly busty, blonde, and the single most useful woman alive right now, but she also has that hot secretary/librarian look.

►Noveltry

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Can we all just take a moment to appreciate that Dragon Jesus is clearly a Man of Culture? Baring a loli, he has most major bases covered. And there might be more we aren't aware of.

►MR.Krew

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Dragon's Day, MR. Krew edition: 3 Doomsday, 6:15-19

And the Elden Lord lay his eyes upon the flock, the heroes you once opposed him now supplicating at his feet in twisting regret. His consorts at his sides spoke the words of truth:

Let there be no discrimination.

Let no judgment be cast on others based on race, colour or creed.

All are welcome. Tall and small. Thick and thin. No matter your fetish, your preference, or your disposition, all are welcome to join together in love and acceptance.

Bra-men.

►Addons

Replied On Oct 27th 2018:

Bra-men.

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♦ Topic: Trigon the Terribly Dead

In: Boards ► Supers ► Elden Lord ► Encounters

Titanomachina (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)

Posted On Oct 30th 2018:

And he's done it again! Another possible apocalypse averted by our resident White Dragon.

For those living under a rock, here are the cliff notes.

A few of the Elden Lord's consorts (Glynda and Scathach) have been training the Teen

Titans. Supposedly this was to help ease the tension between his family and the PRT. That is probably true (Alt!Wonder Woman and Artoria have also been working with the league recently for the same goal) but not the extent of the Dragon's plan, oh no.

To make a long (and still a bit unclear) story short, a bunch of demons were planning to ritualistically sacrifice Raven to summon a Demon Lord and open a gate to hell in the process.

So the Elden Lord laid a cunning trap.

After luring the demons out into the open (minimizing casualties as he could), he saves our favourite goth heroine and kills not only the cultists but the demon lord as well, while barely lifting a finger. Scathach, meanwhile, is being the personification of Scarousal and fighting an army from hell by herself. Glynda Goodwitch rescues the Titans (who were mind-controlled by the demons.)

There are videos, pictures, and reports HERE, but I would caution anyone before clicking the link. It is some disturbing stuff.

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►Notparanoid

Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

SEE!

I was right!

It clearly doesn't care about people. Why else would he let the Teen Titans walk into a trap like that? Or let so many people die? They were bait.

All it cared about was getting one of its women more power. Now, on top of a dragon the size of a continent, we have to worry about its pet Demon Lord.

And look what it did to those guys! The Elden Lord is no hero!

►Char

Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

I don't like people dying any more than anyone does, but what other option was there?

I'm not being facetious. I am asking a genuine question.

What do you do if you know an attack will happen but not where, when, or by whom, and only know their goal?

What happened to the people in that mall sucked, no questions about it, as did what happened to the Titans, but I genuinely cannot see another option. Things could have been

so much worse if the demons, the gate, or Trigon had gotten away to fight another day.

►**Pedantics** (Super Groupie)
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

The Elden Lord has repeatedly repeated that he's not a hero, nor will he follow human laws unless it's convenient. He'd never pretended to be anything but what he is. That doesn't mean the good he does is bad.

PS: Even if you ignore everything else, you gotta admire the balls of this guy to trade bants with a Demon Lord so casually.

►**Notparanoid**
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

@Pedantics Yes, it does. If you're not being a hero for the right reasons, you are not a hero, plain and simple. You cannot trust heroes in it for money, fame, or power. It obviously has other goals, and doing good is tangential to them. Ergo, we cannot trust it.

►**Fillers**
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

@Notparanoid

In order to not get banned, I'll keep it civil, but I severely dislike people like you. You are the type of person who thinks others risking their lives, their families, and their lively hoods is only acceptable if they are doing it 'altruistically.'

Heroes need to eat, sleep and make money in order to survive, just the same as us. Only selfish idiots demand others sacrifice their lives for them without a reward.

Look at the Titans. They are volunteers that just went through hell in order to save people. They didn't need to do that. Instead of worrying about motivations, we should judge them based on their actions. And their actions, like those of the Elden Lord, Glynda, Scathach, Artoria, Alt!WW and Alt!Raven, make them heroes in my book.

►**Mainlytrouble** (Super Husband)
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

@Fillers Well said.

Our hearts and prayers go out to everyone in San Fransico.

►**Antigone**
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

I hope the Titans are doing all right. Nobody should have to go through that. Especially heroes that young.

►**Miraclemic**
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

You know, I kind of feel bad for the League. They are constantly being shown up.

►**Tripleres**
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

I don't. I'm just happy someone is planning ahead for once. Too often, heroes only show up when it's too late. It's not their fault, but the Elden Lord clearly does things differently. He plans ahead and sets traps. If that Demon Lord had managed to get through, we'd all be doomed.

►**Addons**
Replied On Oct 30th 2018:

To be fair to heroes, I am sure they do plan ahead and set traps. It's just that what they can prepare for is limited to their power and knowledge. The Elden Lord obviously has more of both thanks to his Wonder Woman and, now we know, Raven.

BTW: Milf Raven is the best thing ever. Of all time.

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♦ **Topic: Elden Lord Interview**
In: Boards ► Supers ► Elden Lord ► Info
Notprobed (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted On Nov 3rd 2018:

As is the case with everything Elden Lord-related, there is a lot to unpack here.

This thread is a general one about the interview. Specific topics such as Religion, Powers, or particular Consorts have their own threads.

I'll start us off with the most essential questions:

Who gets the TV rights for the story? My vote is HBO.

And who plays who?

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►QwertyD

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Does anyone else find it weird how much the dragon from space knows about human history? Like, I get he had to have stopped off here at some point to meet Medea or Scathach, if nothing else, but he knows a lot about other stuff.

I mean, most Christians don't even know about its early days and its controversies as it became the state religion in Rome, but the alien does? Was he around for it? Or is there something I'm missing?

►Answer Key

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I think he was human. Not like us-human, but similar enough that he wants to study us. He did say his race could have bred with us. That is usually the sign of one species, even if they are different in appearance. If I found out a race of people who look exactly like me were out there, I would want to study them too. He's been here for a month and a half now. Maybe he's catching up on what he missed.

Then again, a bunch of aliens look human, so what do I know.

►Joshthebossh

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Please click this link.

We are starting a petition to ask the Elden Lord to create an afterlife.

►Man-a-hat-in

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Damnit! Rick-rolled again!

But that isn't a half-bad idea. I don't mind a bit of sacrifice, prayer or whatever if you get a guaranteed party for eternity.

►**Savehalf**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Man-a-hat-in Didn't you hear him? You don't get to choose your afterlife. Whoever you make a deal with does. For all you know, his afterlife could be an eternity on his Death Island.

Who needs that many poisonous swamps?

►**CuteisJustice**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I mean, if I have to choose between a peaceful but boring forever or one created by Ham Dragon Jesus, I kinda want to try the latter, if only for morbid curiosity.

►**Ekul**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Ha. Morbid. *Eye Rolling intensifying.*

►**Antigone**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I'm still reserving judgment before I say one way or the other. I don't like his family situation, it doesn't sit right with me for so many women to be with one man, or how he dealt with those men in San Fran, but he has done a lot of good.

I'm still in wait-and-see mode.

►**Acree** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I saw those videos. Threw up my dinner. But, weirdly, I think I like it better that way. Not the brutal murder part, that was gross, but the willingness to get shit done, ya know? It seems like every day, there is news about another jailbreak, and it's nice to know some

villains are gone for good.

►**Char**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

@Acree I get you, there are a bunch of villains that should be shot, but we have to realize that it is a dangerous game to be playing. If we leave the decision on who lives and who dies to those with superpowers, moral or not, then we cease to have any control over our fate.

I like Superman, and I trust Superman, but I don't want the boy in blue to be able to decide my justice system. It's not perfect by any stretch, and it struggles with the rise in the number of Supers in the last few decades, but it is ours.

►**Addons**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

No, but seriously, the more I learn about Mikael, the less freaked out about him I am. By this point, we know more about his life than most heroes that have been around for ages.

Knowing his story now, or at least the basics, I feel like I understand him more than actual heroes. He was dealt a shit deal, and went through some terrible stuff, but he came out on the other side remarkably human (in attitude, if not race and power)

Notice how he speaks of his wives? Everything he does is tied to them.

How do I put this? It's like a family man holding the nuclear launch codes. You know they pose an existential risk, but you're not afraid because you know they would never hurt their wife and kids. Or wives, in this case.

►**Ofage**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I can imagine it now:

Wife 1: You destroyed the Earth! You're sleeping on the couch!

Mikael: Yes, dear.

Wife 2: I'm the couch.

►**Pedantics** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Familiarity breeds contempt.

Or: I was scared of Space Dragon, but he keeps making my life better (entertaining and safer), so now I'm not.

►**Fillers**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I'm still scared of the lizard from space with teeth the size of actual mountains; thank you very much.

…But if he's looking for another consort, I won't say no.

►**Affectionstarved**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I get ya. His not really a himbo, too smart and crafty for that, but he does have that biker dad energy, you know?

Guys want a good girl who will be bad only for them.

Girls want a bad boy who will be good only for them.

I can't think of a better example of the latter than a man literally providing his wife with her Demon Lord dad's heart on a platter.

►**MR.Krew**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Currently, the Mikael/Raven (demon-dragon) pairing is still going strong, but so far, it is falling behind in the polls. Knight-dragon is in a solid third place behind Wonder-dragon but ahead of Blueberry-Dragon in fifth.

In an overwhelming lead is Bard-Dragon, by 15%. It used to be neck and neck before the interview.

If you want to vote on your favourite pairing for Dragon Jesus, you can find my site here.

The 'other' option is for any consorts we don't know about or any he adds while on

Earth.

►**Tripleres**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

I just had an excellent idea for a poll.

What is the next unbelievable thing the Elden Lord (or one of his wives) does that sets the internet on fire?

Impressive villain capture/kill. Answering more existential questions? Something wholesome? Something disturbing? Resurrects Elvis?

Fill it out here.

►**Thequiethalf** (Super Wife)

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

Elvis never died, idiot.

I have my money on another interview, myself. One with one or more of the women. I get that the Elden Lord is kind of the “Big Thing” right now, but I would like to get more information from the women since he won’t speak about their secrets.

They’ve been pretty lowkey, all things considered.

►**bothad**

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

@Thequiethalf I agree. I want to learn more about them.

It’s a bit weird, now that I think of it. If I saw Mikael in the street, I’d like to shake his hand or give a high five, but if I saw any of the women, I think I’d be too intimidated to even say hello.

How is the dragon the size of the continent the most approachable one in that family?

►**Xamaniac** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Nov 3rd 2018:

@Tripleres You need to add another option to your poll.

It’s almost time for another attack.

At least if the pattern holds after Ziz’s death.

■

PROBATION VI

Desert rose, desert plain
I have seen so much pain
Now I see into the eyes of a girl
No more, no more, cruel world
Cruel, cruel world, must I go on?
Cruel, cruel world, I'm moving on
I've been living too fast
And I've been living too wrong
Cruel, cruel world, I'm gone

Rita Wayword, Spiral, still lived.

And she hated that.

Life had not been kind to Rita.

Falling in love with the wrong man at the wrong time left her stranded in a foreign universe, tortured and altered to serve as the right-hand woman of the leader of that world.

Then the Simurgh got her.

Anyone familiar with the Endbringers knows they don't really *get* magic.

They can see its effects, fight them, and are not blind to its potential to damage them. But it's a hiccup in their system, a weakness that the heroes of this world have used to keep them at bay.

It has been conclusively proven, time and time again, that heroes who draw their powers from technology, biology, or any combination thereof, are measurably less effective against Endbringers than heroes with equivalent powers in magic.

Superman has never landed a hit on Ziz.

Shazam has.

The Entities from which Shards and Endbringers originate are creatures of biology and science. They lacked the creativity and imagination to use magic. Older Cycles they had engaged in had not brought forth enough information to combat this natural flaw in their design.

While Earth was not the only planet in the universe to hold magic, certainly not the multi-verse, it was the first one to have enough people who used it as their source of power for it to pose a genuine threat to the Cycle.

The Simurgh had plans to change that, to gather knowledge, data, and experimental data on magic so it would stop ruining her plans.

Rita Wayword, Spiral, would have been the tool she used to remove her one weakness.

So the Endbringer pulled the six-armed mutant from Mojoworld to Madison, altering her cybernetic implants so that she could not act on her own. All the angelic-shaped being had to do was sever a slight connection between the brain and the automatic control unit of her implants. By measures of those physical controls, getting around her immunity from possession, she would follow the orders of anyone and everyone.

Trapped in the prison of her own mind, Rita could only watch, helpless for over a year, as her body did cruel, unspeakable acts. Not that she felt guilty over them, long gone mad as she was, even before the Simurgh pulled her through. Her helplessness just fuelled her rage and sadism.

The urge to lash out grew with each order she was forced to bend to, each new master she must serve.

Her only times of self-control were when the self-preservation modules would allow her to act against targets. In those brief instances of freedom, Rita relished the pain she inflicted on others, a tiny part of what was inflicted on her.

Through these control methods, the Simurgh could regulate her use of magic by using others as a medium. The Endbringer predicted an increase of 1/10619863 of a percent of increased efficiency of dealing with magic every time Spiral cast a spell.

Of course, that was not the extent of her plans regarding the six armed mutants, as she was still following the Prime Directive. Spiral had enormous magical potential, enough to be a Sorcerer Supreme candidate if adequately trained and motivated.

If she could use even a fraction of that potential, then there was a risk she could overthrow the Simurgh's plans, but at the same time, the more magic she used, the more data the Enbringer could aggregate.

The key was to release Spiral's shackles in such a way as to fulfill the Prime Directive at the same time as directing her to create more data with minimal risk.

During Ziz's next attack, Johannesburg, in the spring of 2019, she would release the Butcher from her dimensional prison, trapped there by the Scarlet Witch when the body-hopping villain had attempted to have Magneto kill them.

Filled with wroth, the villain would leave for the US, the last known location of the mutant father and daughter. While there, the Butcher would carve another swath of destruction through the west coast, dying twice and gathering further powers, even as their goals changed with different hosts.

Then, in a joint meeting with other PRT heads, one James Tagg would put forth the idea of 'trapping' the Butcher in the body of Spiral, held in their custody for over a year.

Unaware that Spiral was immune to possession.

Unaware that the process would 'free' Rita from the control of her implants thanks to one of the Butcher's powers healing the connection to the automatic control unit.

The shackles Mojo and the Simurgh had placed on Spiral would be lifted through the Butcher.

In two attacks, a total of forty-seven minutes and thirteen seconds, the Simurgh will have unleased a magician with enough power to qualify as the Sorcerer Supreme, who could teleport through dimensions, who held shards of all the other Butcher's powers, and one who suffered from intense psychosis at the hands of PRT and heroes due to their wariness of a Ziz bomb.

With so little effort, the Endbringer would gather all the data she needed on magic, satisfy her Prime Directive, and create one of the greatest threats the world had ever seen.

Unable to be killed due to fear of the Butcher moving to a new host.

Unable to be imprisoned, thanks to her powerful teleportation.

But the best-laid plans of mice and Endbringers oft go astray.

In all her predictions, the Simurgh did not, could not, see herself being 'Nom-ed' to death by a dragon the size of Great Britain.

Nor could she have predicted that Amanda Waller would send Spiral to the Island, where she would be killed by the Faerie Queen, who was still trapped in the Birdcage in the Endbringer's predictions.

If Ciara's power was Shard based, as it was in Worm, that would have been the end of Rita Wayword, able to pass on. Finally freed from the prison of her body and mind.

But that wasn't the end for poor Rita Wayword.

Glaistig Uaine's power might have started out the same as her counterparts, but it had attracted the attention of something… Blacker.

The Rot was not Shard-based.

And so Rita Wayword died, yet still lived, immune to the control of the Parliament of Decay thanks to her mutation.

The Simurgh's plan succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, as the shade of Rita Wayword, Spiral, screamed her pain, rage, and freedom.

Ready to lash out, to rain destruction on those who had done this to her, Rita tried to teleport to her once prison so she may exact her bloody vengeance on those who had confined and controlled her. From there, the rest of the PRT. Then Mojoworld. Then Longshot. Then everyone and everything else.

But she couldn't.

Spiral's magical senses reached out to her destination, grasping for the spatial/

temporal coordinates of the cell she was so familiar with in a PRT containment facility.

But her senses found nothing.

Nothing but the smooth, glittering Jewel.

No longer controlled, yet still trapped, Rita screamed.

She screamed not because she was in pain or trying to intimidate anyone.

Spiral screamed for all the years she wanted to scream but could not.

******

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

Spiral started to dance, screaming her undead throat raw as her hips gyrated and her arms waived maniacally in frenzied movement.

Deathstroke threw himself to the side.

Having spent weeks with the mutant, he knew any spell she cast that needed that much movement would be enormously powerful.

Even with his decisive actions, Slade Wilson would have died in those first few seconds if not for Solomon Grundy.

The shade of the great zombie launched itself at the dancing spell caster in an instant, obeying the unspoken command of the Avatar of the Black.

He was too late to stop the spell from being cast.

BOOOM!

The ship shattered as the explosion ripped through it with immense force. Metal shards measuring in feet flew with the speed of bullets, impaling dozens of black shades as the ship fractured and cracked from the shockwave.

The vessel rocked and buckled, sending the uninjured but coughing form of Gavel sliding off the edge and into the bay below.

The explosion's epicentre had been Spiral herself, perhaps in an attempt to finally end her eternal imprisonment and her un-life. She had not been spared the damage of heat and force. All that remained of her was a skeleton of charred flesh and blackened metal cybernetics.

Grundy, with a strength and durability that could rival Superman, had fared slightly better despite his close proximity. His massive body had blocked a large portion of the blast as he tried to stop the suicidal explosion, inadvertently saving Deathstroke.

Still, so close to the explosion, he took his own injuries. The front half of his body had faced the blast of heat and force. The top layer of his skin was flayed from his muscles, his internal organs boiled in his exposed chest, and all his ratty hair was gone, but he still

stood on blackened legs.

“Why must you cry out, my Dancer?” Ciara asked gently as she stepped out from behind the chared form of her greatest warrior.

Already whisps of black energy were wafting from the remains of Grundy and the other shades damaged by the explosion. The boogeyman of the Super world approached the reconstituting body of Spiral and held her black skull in her hands as a mother would a child.

“Can you not see? I have freed you from the Oppressor’s yoke,” Ciara stroked the flaking cheek as it reformed, mercy and compassion in her gaze. “No more will you dance to his tune, to his bird’s song. Cry not, my Dancer. You are no longer a prop on the stage, you are now an actor, and I am your voice. Cry not. Scream not. Let us laugh together.”

Spiral’s reformed hands gently fell upon the pair holding her cheeks.

“aaaaaa,” Rita moaned pitifully, throat and lungs still reforming.

Then she paralyzed Glaistic Uaine.

“aaaahhhAAAAhhhaaAAAHHHHHHHH!” Spiral warbled, metal limbs digging and tearing into the flesh of the paralyzed woman holding her. She screamed as she tore chunk after chunk from her victim, each second increasing her volume as her body reformed.

Ciara did not scream.

She did not flinch or cry, and her eyes continued to gaze down with gentle affection at Spiral as the mutant tore her heart from her body.

Three of the black shades tackled Spiral away from her as a fourth laid its hand upon her and freed the Faerie Queen from her paralysis. Already her flesh had reformed.

“I understand,” Ciara said softly, watching Spiral blast one shade to pieces even as she used a mixture of martial arts and her six arms to defend from the other two. “A newborn’s cries. Your old life is over, and you celebrate your new one. I did the same when I threw off the yoke and bridle. Very well.”

Her words were soft. Understanding. Full of compassion even as one of her shades had its head torn off.

“Let your fellow warriors provide you a stage for the first rehearsal of your new life, my Dancer.”

A tide of black shades descended upon the mutant.

Rita continued to scream.

******

The shock of the water woke Slade up.

Despite being protected by Grundy's bulk and throwing himself away, being so close to such a large shockwave had discombobulated the mercenary enough that he had lost consciousness.

Only for a moment, though, as his body fell from the ship's deck into the bay's shallow water. The cold was enough to reinvigorate him and open his eyes, even as he choked on the salty cold water.

Fighting dizziness, Slade looked around as pieces of the ship rained down from above him, mixing the water with bubbles and silt and obscuring his vision even further as the weight of his equipment threatened to drown him.

Were it not for the bright light of the two moons, Slade would have been completely blind in the dark water.

Sploosh!

A massive piece of what was once one of the guns on the ship fell into the water, missing Slade by less than two feet but still dragging the man further down with the suction of displaced water. The mercenary swam frantically, dropping all his guns but keeping his sword as he desperately fought to rise to the surface for air.

A part of his mind, the part that was always calm and in control in any situation, noted that the ship would sink soon and drag him down if he didn't get clear. That same part told him he would not be able to keep swimming for long. Exhaustion would claim him if any sea-based monsters didn't.

Mastering any panic that might have doomed lesser men, Slade swam at an angle, away from the ship but closer to shore.

His head broke the surface for an instant, and Slade gratefully took in a lungful of air before diving down again.

His only hope for survival was to pass unnoticed by the Faerie Queen. Hopefully, she either thought him dead or was too busy with whatever was wrong with Spiral to care about someone she wouldn't even add to her army.

More debris continued to rain down in the ocean, but most of it fell behind the mercenary as he made his way as stealthily as possible toward the shore. Though he was forced to come up for air two more times, Slade made it to the beach and crawled upon the wet sand of the coast, panting for breath.

Looking around, Slade realized he wasn't far from the dock connecting to the sinking ship. The night air shook with the sounds of metal tearing, explosions detonating, and Spiral screaming as the mutant fought more and more of the Faerie Queen's shades.

Slade gave himself only five seconds of rest before climbing to his feet, only to almost fall again as his left leg seized up in pain.

Looking down, the bright blue light of Dark Moon glinted off a long piece of shrapnel in the meat of his left thigh.

As he looked southward along the coast for a second, the mercenary considered trying to leave anyway. It didn't look like it hit anything fatal, and he could tear his clothes to make a rough bandage. He didn't want to be close to Spiral or Glaistic Uaine for any longer than he had to.

But then his brain, his greatest tool, reasserted itself.

Slade might avoid the conflict between the two deranged women by leaving now, but he was now alone. With no backup, his only chance of survival was to avoid or outrun threats. Injured, his chances of reaching the ship with the portal were practically nil.

On the other hand, he had a very brief window of opportunity.

Deathstroke was not an indecisive man.

Without further pause, he limped away from the crashing surf and toward the remains of the Russian camp, the battle echoing behind him as he moved as fast as he could without aggravating his injury. Thanks to the squad's earlier inspection, it took comparatively little time to find a basic first aid kit in the wreckage of the camp.

With quick and practiced movements, Slade withdrew the shrapnel from his thigh. The jagged piece of ship hull was thrown away without care as he bandaged his leg, popped a few pain meds in his mouth, and quickly put together a sack full of everything he might need to survive on this accursed island in the coming weeks.

Once he had a safe place to set up, he would stitch up the wound, but this would have to do for now.

As he worked, Slade kept an eye on the battle, fearful that the Supers would take their bout to the shore. He caught glimpses of Spiral fighting off shades two or three at a time, the Faerie Queen watching patiently from Grundy's shoulders.

The entire medical and scavenging process took less than ten minutes, but it was enough time for the whole of the ship to be torn asunder, and the combatants started duelling on the few pieces of debris that still floated on the surface.

Through it all, Spiral kept screaming. Her voice rose and fell, depending on if she was injured, reforming, or casting spells, but she just wouldn't stop.

Thanks to Glaistic Uaine's power, she never would, Slade realized.

It was time to go.

With his bag over his shoulder, a pistol and a few mags he managed to scrounge at his hip, and his sword in hand, Slade Wilson set off south toward the ship he had arrived on.

With stealthy movements, only slightly hampered by the bulk of his supplies and injuries, Slade navigated along the coast's rocks in the moons' dark light, their jagged

edges and bulging shadows hiding him better than the barren plain would have.

He was forty feet from the camp when he heard it.

“Ack, ack, bleurgh!”

Peeking out from a dip between two wave-washed rocks, Slade spied a prominent figure in the shadows.

Gavel looked wretched, his skin grey and sickly as he leaned sat with his back to a boulder, coughing and hacking seawater and blood as he leaned heavily on the RPG he had managed to keep a hold of in his unexpected swim.

Once more that night, Slade had a judgment call to make that could save or doom him.

Gavel, even sick and injured as he was, was a Super to be reckoned with. Even if he acted only as a meat shield or an extra pair of eyes, he would make the trip south safer.

Another deafening explosion rang out in the distance.

Slade made his decision as he quietly stepped away, leaving his erstwhile squadmate to whatever fate had in store for him.

Whatever benefit the Australian could provide was outweighed by the fact he would slow Deathstroke down. On top of that, he couldn’t count on Spiral keeping the Faerie Queen occupied forever.

It was well known the deranged necromancer could sense Supers from miles away, and once she was finished with the six-armed woman, she’d come for Gavel.

It barely took another minute, even with Slade’s slow and careful pace, to reach the boundary where the coastal rocks gave way to sand and then the trees of the forest.

The mercenary was about to dash for the protective obscurity of the woods when, once again, his careful observations and quick mind saved his life.

In the sand between the beach and the trees were four paw prints.

Small and cat-shaped, a regular person might have judged them to be simple tracks left by an animal that lived nearby.

Deathstroke was no regular person.

His mind saw those four imprints, noticed the lack of others on the sand and their distance from the grass and rocks, and his mind went into overdrive.

Cat prints.

Hookwolf.

Bayun.

Powersurge.

Slade’s heartbeat pounded in his ears as a cold sweat ran down his back. Fear, cold and dreadful, filled him.

“I know you’re there,” he called out. Not loud, lest he attracts the attention of something or someone else on the island, but his voice was firm.

It betrayed none of the terror he was feeling.

There was no response, but Deathstroke didn’t move his gaze from those four paw prints in the sand.

“It’s no use pretending, Cat,” he continued. He could see nothing. Hear nothing but the waves, Gavel’s faint coughing, and the rumble of battling Supers.

Every second that passed increased the likelihood of his death.

But it was on the edge of death that one could find a chance to live.

A fifth paw print in the sand.

A sixth.

Between the sixth and the seventh, a chubby white and brown cat with tiny wings shimmered into view.

“Mrow,” The Cat greeted as it plopped itself on the sand five feet in front of the mercenary. Its breath tinged with ice crystals in the night air as its feline gaze met Slade’s. Its tail swished back and forth behind it.

“You’ve been following us, right?” Slade asked, already knowing the answer. His heartbeat was thunder in his ears. “You ate Killer Frost, didn’t you? Just like you did Hookwolf and Powersurge. You eat Supers.”

The Cat’s cute little tongue ran across its lips.

Slade repressed a shudder.

“I’m not a Super,” he said clearly. Another explosion rang out behind him, but he didn’t flinch. The Cat’s eyes left him instantly, tail swishing angrily as it glared at the battle before refocusing on the mercenary. “I’m just a regular human.”

“Mrow,” The Cat tilted its head in a display that would have been cute to anyone who didn’t know what a monster it was.

“I know where one is,” Slade continued, using everything he knew about hunting animals to escape this mess. “Injured. Sick. Helpless. Easy prey.”

The mercenary had no idea if Gavel’s invulnerability would protect him from this… thing, but he was more than willing to sell his former squadmate under the bus if it bought him time to run.

“Mrow,” The Cat looked towards the rocks where Gavel lay, then back to Slade.

“I’ll fight,” the mercenary said, hand on his sword. “If I scream, he’ll come help. And the Faerie Queen will come to look too.” At the mention of the last, The Cat looked at the remains of the ship. Its fur stood on end as it let out a displeased hiss. Was it afraid? Or angry? Either way, it was conscious of the woman’s danger. “Or you can let me go. You

get an easy meal and don't have to deal with-"

"Deathstroke? Cough, cough, ah, hack. That you?" Gavel called out across the beach, and the mercenary froze.

The Cat looked at Deathstroke, amusement in its gaze as it stood once again.

Slade tensed as it casually walked toward him, swaying with a cat's swagger as it approached one tiny step at a time. Its soft paws made no sound on the sand.

His hand grasped his sword's hilt, ready to attack at the slightest movement. The Cat continued its casual, plodding pace. Its tubby belly jiggled with every movement as it walked up the world's greatest mercenary.

And past him, brushing against his legs as it did so.

Slade released his breath.

That brush had not been affection.

It had been a taunt.

The Cat could kill him at any point but chose not to. It could rub against him, and he could do nothing about it.

Slade was okay with that.

He had his pride, but he valued his life much more. In a world full of Supers, he had gotten to where he was today by swallowing his pride. People with power overlooked and underestimated those without it. Slade had killed some of the strongest Supers in the world because they underestimated him.

The Cat might look down on him, but it was Deathstroke, not any of the powerful Supers in his team, that would escape.

Slade wasted no time making a beeline for the forest.

"Wha? ARGH!" Gavel screamed behind him, but the mercenary continued on even as the hiss of an RPG going off rang out.

BOOM!

"AAHHHHHHHHH!"

For an instant, Gavel's screams of pain and fear drowned out Spirals.

Squelch.

Then there were no screams.

Deathstroke continued to make his way south toward freedom.

******

Spiral teleported away from a concussive blast of force, appearing ten feet above the Faerie Queen's head.

“AAAAAHHHHHH!” She continued to scream even as she cast another spell, sinking the piece of ship the woman stood on with a localized gravity well.

Solomon Grundy simply held his summoner’s body and hopped to a new platform. The shade of a Changer, shaped like a demented parody of a pterodactyl made of barbed wire, crashed into the six-armed mutant, sending them both falling. A Blaster released a torrent of lighting, frying them both.

“Let my voice guide you, my Dancer,” Ciara said, sitting daintily in the Grundy’s palms. “I know your pain. Your death whispered it to me. For long has the chain held tight to your neck. Before the Oppressor’s bird’s song, it was the Spineless Director. Before that, it was the chains of ignorance, of naivety. Your old life was naught but chains and pain.”

“AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!” Spiral screamed as she reformed. The same electric Blaster unleashed another volley, but the mutant teleported behind the shade and paralyzed it with a touch.

Then she teleported behind another, this one a man wielding a long spear, and paralyzed him as well.

She didn’t kill them, just paralyzing their movements before teleporting to a new victim. In twenty seconds, she managed to immobilize seven shades.

Then she touched a shade that caused her arm to melt into a bloody and meaty slurry. Then another arm fell. Then her body dissolved into a disgusting mush.

“My warriors, your new companions, are many and varied. The Parliaments must use all tools to overthrow the Oppressor’s yoke. My army may be small, but it is strong.”

By the time Spiral reformed, her paralysis victims had been freed by one of the other shades. The one that reset things to a prior state that had released Ciara earlier.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHH!” Spiral cried, ghostly blades forming in four of her hands as she tore through the shade that melted her. She had to replace three of the swords as they turned to a slurry.

Another shade tried to tackle her, a brute of some sort, but was cut down just as quickly before she teleported beside the shade that reset the others. Its head fell even as Spiral’s spine was severed by a metallic arm.

“Your first dance is beautiful but pointless,” Ciara continued to talk to the deranged mutant from her place of safety in Grundy’s cupped hands. “Cease this rebellion and join us. With each day that passes, the Oppressor conscripts more to his army. He has almost reached the point of saturation. The final battle approaches. This island shall be our fortress, our utopia, our ark. Aid us in its defence and conquest. When the Parliaments convene, this Jeweled vessel will see us safely in the coming storm.”

“AAAAAAHHHHH!”

Once more, Spiral tried to teleport close to the Faerie Queen, only to be batted aside by an errant swipe of Solomon Grundy's massive fist.

She flew, end over end, before crashing to the ground on the shore, her body carving a deep divot in the sand and dirt.

The small army of shades followed her, surrounding her pulverized body in a ring twenty feet wide.

"Let your screams quiet, my Dancer. Your throat grows hoarse," Ciara gently said as the shades parted for her and Grundy's massive form. "Pain will be a thing of the past. Let all of it fade to Black."

"aaaaaaaaAAAAAAHHHHHH!" Spiral warbled, dragging herself with her three workings arms through the dirt toward the Faerie Queen as her legs bent back into place. "AAAAAAA-"

The scythe's blade separated her head from her neck in a clean swing.

"Can thou not hear her pleas for rest?"

Rita Wayword, Spiral, did not hear those words. Nor did she feel pain.

Since her capture, Spiral's mind had been filled with voices. The commands of Mojo, then the incessant song of a dead Endbringer and the whispers of the Parliament of Decay. They could not control her mind like her body, but they were always there. Always loud and incessant.

Not anymore.

For the first time in years, Spiral's mind was blissfully silent.

Rita was finally at peace.

******

Priscilla tightened her hands upon the shaft of her scythe.

"My Dancer?" The fey woman asked, her voice pained and in disbelief as it stared in horror at the dissolving corpse.

She fell from her giant's hand and walked to the fallen form. She cradled the head gently in her hands as if a lost child, even as it dissolved into strands of black dust. Whatever else, this woman cared about her 'warriors' in some twisted fashion.

Which made her deafness to their pleas all the more inexcusable to the Crossbreed.

Her Lifehunt had ensured the poor woman finally found the solace of death. It was taking all her self-control to not do the same for the shades that surrounded her.

This was not what death was supposed to be.

Some of these men and women might have been great criminals, vile fiends, or

monsters in human form, but they did not deserve what was happening to them.

Death was the great equalizer.

A gentle embrace that accepted all without judgment.

This torturous existence, these cries of the damned, was wrong on a fundamental level to Priscilla. It reminded her too much of the Undead Curse and the Dark Sign.

Only she could now understand their plight thanks to her Element.

Priscilla had stayed her hand for days. She, too, had been curious about this necromancer's goal and watched her actions with curious disgust.

But the tortured cries of the woman had been too much for the gentle giantess.

Even now, surrounded by dozens of black shades and the woman Sir Bard was wary of, Priscilla did not regret her actions.

"What have you done?" The Faerie Queen asked, looking up at Priscilla with tears beading in her eyes. She was a third the Crossbreed's size, but Priscilla knew not to underestimate a woman that even Sir Bard was wary of. "My Dancer is beyond me, beyond the Black."

"She is beyond thought and pain," Priscilla said softly, her tone gentler than it had been. "Thine 'Black' is but an approximation of true death. A trap between the boundary. Neither Life nor Death."

"Life is a gateway to the Rot," Ciara said as if in a daze.

"A Black Rot instead of Scarlet," Priscilla asked, and the woman at her feet nodded. "I understand. The fault is not with thou but with thy masters. A power over Life bent to control the Dead. And thy victims suffer for it. Release them. I shall petition Sir Bard to allow thee to leave. This Island shall once more know peace with thy parting."

"Release them?" Glaistig Uaine asked, looking up at the Crossbreed with wide, fearful eyes. "My warriors and comrades in arms?"

"Thy slaves," Priscilla corrected gently but firmly. "Can thee not hear their wails? Let mine scythe bring them to rest. Should they wish to join thee after, I shall have no complaint, but it must be of their volition. Not the will of thy masters."

"I had not thought to lose a comrade before the final battle," Ciara said as she rose to her feet, Spiral's head still cradled gently in her arms as the last of it dissolved into nothing.

"Should thy companions wish to continue to aid thee after they know peace, I shall call forth their Spirit Ash for thee," Priscilla allowed. She didn't know what battle the woman was discussing but knew she could no longer look at these shades without tears prickling her eyes.

Her heart went out to them. Their mouths might be closed, but their soul's wails were

deafening when she stood this close.

“I refuse!”

Priscilla’s heart sank, and hands tightened once more upon her scythe.

She hated violence, even if she understood it was sometimes required.

“Why?” The Crossbreed didn’t even try to keep the sadness from her voice.

“The Oppressor’s army grows with each day. The Parliaments must keep what few soldiers we hold,” Ciara declared firmly. “Should your words prove true and they are in pain, I would ask them to bear with it for a few more years. If Life is to continue, we must all make sacrifices.”

“Sacrificing others and not thyself is no true sacrifice.”

“Should my sacrifice be required, I shall give it. This play is nearing its curtain call, and all actors must one day take their final bow. I act to ensure the curtain may rise again.”

“Will thee not consider peace?” Priscilla couldn’t help but ask in one last-ditch attempt to avoid violence. “Let the dead lie, and I shall aid thee and petition Sir Bard on thy behalf. He is no fan of oppressors and mine sisters enjoy the thrill of battle. We might be allies.”

“Albion’s and his queens’ help would not be worth the bonds of my fellow warriors,” Ciara gently shook her head in the negative. “Not when I have naught but a promise of a petition.”

“Should we battle, thou shalt lose thy life and all companions with it,” Priscilla warned. “Thy final battle will go unfought. Even the gods fear mine scythe.”

“That will not be so,” Ciara denied. “Instead, you and yours shall join the Parliaments. You shall aid me in our battle against the Oppressor. Then you shall see that threat that would destroy all life. But first, tell me your name. I cannot hear your story as I can others. You are blind to my sight and mute to my ears.”

“My name is Priscilla, a lowly crossbreed,” Priscilla curtsied adequately, as she had been taught many millennia ago. “Wife of the Elden Lord and Dragon of Death.”

“I am Ciara, named Glaistig Uaine and the Faerie Queen by my foes. Avatar of the Black. Valkyrie of the Parliament of Decay.”

Despite having introduced themselves and knowing conflict was inevitable, neither woman moved for a long instant.

Then the Ash of Black Knive Tiche appeared, wrapping herself around the Faerie Queen like a snake and plunging her blade into Ciara’s neck.

Solomon Grundy roared, charging at the Spirit Ash, who released the woman and backflipped out of reach.

All around Priscilla, the army of black shades launched themselves at her.

Dozens of pale white spirits burst into existence around the Crossbreed, meeting the tide of dark shades with their bodies as Priscilla launched herself at her opponent, scythe raised to end the battle with one swing.

Her Observation Haki warned her enough to dodge out of the way of a blast of lightning that scorched a path through her summoned ashes.

Kristoff blocked the blast of electricity before it could do too much damage. Latenna, riding atop a spectral wolf, pierced the offending shade with three arrows before refocusing on the flying shades.

Oleg duelled a shade with a spear, and a shaper transformed into a bear, his blade flashing and carving through black flesh.

Ogha knocked three more over with one of his great arrows but was beset by a shade who melted him with a touch, only to be burned to ash by Amon.

All around her, Prisiclla's ashen companions battled the black shades in a confusing melee of magic, energy, and violence.

Because the Crossbreed had released all the ashes who wished to pass, her army was much less numerous than her opponent's, even if they were more skilled. The shades also had the advantage in the diversity of powers and, unlike Spirit Ashes, reformed as soon as they were destroyed by anyone but Priscilla's Lifehunt.

Even as Pricilla cut down the shade of a man whose hair had turned into a bladed whip, Ciara's throat healed, and the fragment of the Rune of Death in Tyche's blade was not enough to put the Avatar down for good.

"I understand," the Faerie Queen said, looking around at the small cohort of white spirits fighting her shades. "Their stories tell me of your love. They are at peace, though they fight. How did you do it?"

"T'was their wish to remain, though their forms were not of their choosing. I simply offered the choice," Priscilla said as her tail swept the feet off a woman, preventing her from wrapping her oscillating arms around the Crossbreed. Her scythe pierced the shade's heart a moment later.

The simple fact was that most Spirit Ashes were created by the spirits' enemies. Exceptionally few willingly choose to come back as ashes. Once Priscilla had discovered their plight, she released those who wanted to pass on.

Most remained, feeling a peace they had never felt before in the presence of the dragon hybrid. They differed from Ciara's shades in that they could pass on any time they wished and were not controlled by the Black or the Faerie Queen's Shard.

"I see," Ciara said, closing her eyes and looking pained. "I did not know such was an

option.”

“Then let them rest.”

“I cannot,” Glaistic Uaine said, even as a beam of light tore through Tricia, dissolving the ash. “The actors may leave, but the stage shall remain. I must turn the Oppressor’s weapons against him. It is the only method of victory.”

“There will be no victory if you fall here,” Priscilla continued to urge.

“The loss of my companions at your hand pains me, but I am winning. You are surrounded and will join us soon,” Ciara pointed out.

“Ah,” Priscilla gasped softly. “I believe Sir Bard said something to this effect once. I am not trapped in here by thee. Thou art trapped in here by I.”

Ciara tilted her head, observing the situation. Each of the Crossbreed’s Spirits was entangled with at least two or three of her shades. They were putting up a spirited defence, but they were losing ground, the circle around Priscilla tightening with every second.

Light bloomed in the night sky.

And Medea rained magic upon the shades.

Purple magic fell in a wave, a carpet bombing that reduced shades and spirits to rubble. Each lance from the Caster’s Rain of Light fell with the force of an A-rank attack.

And there were hundreds of them.

Entangled in combat as the shades were with the Spirit Ashes, not even the most agile could escape the Rain before being shredded.

Over and over, the magical artillery barrage fell upon what was once the Russian camp, reducing it and tens of meters around it to blasted rubble. Even as the shades tried to reform, they were blasted to pieces once more.

Only one small space was spared destruction.

From that small circle, Priscilla launched herself the moment the barrage stopped. The dust and debris obscured her form as her scythe swung for Ciara’s neck.

The Faerie Queen had been largely protected from the magical assault thanks to the bulk of her greatest warrior hunching over her in a protective cocoon. Solomon Grundy was a hodgepodge of holes and charred flesh, but he stood firm, defending his mistress.

Maybe some crude intelligence or instinct still lay in that long rotten mind.

With a spin, Solomon Grundy threw Ciara high into the air at an angle.

The blade pierced his undefended back.

The great zombie, the former Avatar of the Grey, fell to the ground.

“NOOOOOO!” Ciara yelled as she fell through the air, into a tumble on the ground.

Black shades, hundreds in number, burst into reality from her landing point. They

ranged in appearance from children to elderly, men and women. Some were in military uniforms and held arms, but most were empty-handed.

These were not Supers, only regular people. The people Ciara had killed, died around her or passed on in the general area.

All headed the call of the Avatar of the Black.

Medea continued to rain magic down, but the sheer numbers and speed of their reformation meant there was little effect. For every dozen she destroyed, three more replaced them.

Priscilla grimaced as more and more black shades poured from the distraught woman. Their gamble had failed and cost them her Spirit Ashes. Unlike their opponents, they would reform, but it would take a few minutes.

The Crossbreed wasn't specialized for group combat without the Spirits, and she was the only one who could put the shades down for good. It was looking more and more like she would have to transform into her dragon form, which would leave her an easy target for the shades of the Supers who were reforming.

Still, it didn't look like she'd have a choice.

Her decision to put Spiral out of her misery seemed to be a mistake in hindsight. But even now, Priscilla didn't regret it. It was not in her nature to allow such pain to continue when she could do something about it.

The Crossbreed threw herself into the oncoming tide of shades, trying to put a few of them between her and the Supers before transforming. Medea's beams curved around her, their impacts deafening, but Priscilla heard a sound over the din.

Four familiar roars.

No longer drakes since their ascension to Tier 7, the four young dragons fell upon the growing army of undead in defence of their mothers.

Hengeron II and Llamrei II bathed the Super Shades in a torrent of fire, swooping from the night sky in a diving run that disrupted their reformation and gave Priscilla more time.

Andromeda and Cassandra descended from the other directions, their crimson wings bringing them behind the Faerie Queen to stop her summoning at the source. Their fires melted the tide as their claws swooped through the horde.

Priscilla threw herself into motion as the night was lit by the purple Medea's Rain of Light, the red of the dragons' flames, the black swirl of dissolving and reforming shade, and the everpresent glow of the Dark Moon.

Her babies were sturdy, thanks to all the effort Medea had gone into casting defensive charms on them, but even all that magic on top of their scaled hides would not be able to

stand up to a concentrated attack of the Super shades.

Now, more than ever, the Crossbreed was on a time limit.

Lllamrei II flew before her mother, her flames carving a path through the onrush of black figures. She veered upward into a climb as her siblings, approaching from the other direction, met her.

Priscilla had a clear line of sight to Ciara. The boogeyman of the Super world was burning in her children's flames, but shades still burst from her in waves.

Their eyes met, both resolute in their desire for victory.

With one last burst, the Crossbreed launched herself at Glaistic Uaine, scythe raised to end this short battle once and for all.

A shade burst from the Faerie Queen, lightning crackling in its palms and blasting Priscilla in the chest.

The Mimic Tear dissolved.

Priscilla's scythe cut the shade's head off from behind the fading double.

Her momentum carried her forward, swinging once more at the woman only a few feet away.

One last shade burst from the shorter woman. The one that could dissolve things with a touch. It would die in place of its mistress and deprive Priscilla of her weapon with the action.

That was when Medea, her tiny wings flapping to direct her fall from Llamrei II's head, landed on Ciara's shoulder.

Her girth didn't even have time to send the Faerie Queen stumbling before her *Maw* consumed everything above the woman's neck.

Every shade stuttered like a scratch in a record or an internet connection was briefly lost. It was only momentarily, and Ciara's head was already reforming, but something had clearly been lost when Medea ate the woman's head.

That brief stutter was enough for Priscilla to alter her swing and bisect the shade and the woman behind it.

Ciara fell, her head half reformed.

The shades disappeared in a snap, black figures turning into so much dust in the wind.

With the army of the undead gone, all that remained was a blasted battlefield that once held the Russian camp.

Then Medea, having fallen to the ground with the Food Thief, let out a tiny burp and rolled over onto her back.

Priscilla's tension fell, and she let out a small smile as she kneeled on the ground to give the floof the tummy rubs she deserved.

“That was too close,” Medea said as she floated to the ground. The four young dragons followed her, their landing sending the ground rumbling with their bulk. “We should have waited for the others.”

“Mine apologies,” Priscilla said with a bow of the head. Even kneeling, she still towered over the Caster. “I had not intended to intervene until thou gave me permission. When the poor woman fell at mine feet, I could ignore her cries no longer.”

“At least we made it out without serious injuries, or I’d never hear the end of it from Mikael,” Medea sighed but gave a wry smile. Then she rounded on the four dragons. “And what were you all thinking, getting in the middle of a fight like that. You had Mommy scared to death!”

Three of the red dragons looked away as they lowered their long necks in shame. Llamrei II, on the other hand, raised her head proudly. Then she pointed her spiked tail at the cat lying on its back, getting belly rubs.

“I don’t care if she told you to do it!” Medea glared up at the non-compliant dragon. “If she told you to destroy a country, would you?”

There was a beat of silence.

Then all four red dragons nodded.

“That was a rhetorical question!” Medea exclaimed in exasperation. Then her tone softened. “You could have been hurt.” Llamrei II finally looked as abashed as her siblings as she saw the worried look on the Caster’s elfin face. “And don’t think you are getting out of this because you are acting cute,” she declared as she rounded on the fat cat. “No treats for a week! I’ll make sure Mikael doesn’t sneak you any, either!”

Medea, the cat, burped again.

Priscilla smiled at the sight, rising to her feet to look around the devastation.

Though there no bodies remained, she could *See* the dead.

“Thou may all rest in peace,” Priscilla told them, her voice oscillating through a layer of reality most could never perceive. “No one shall disturb thy slumber.”

The hundreds of the Dead only she could see all watched her. Some looked happy, others resigned, and some few even glared at other spirits.

Most looked content, eyes closing as they faded deeper into death’s embrace.

“I shall make of thee all an offer,” Priscilla continued, eyes landing on the spirit of a woman looking around nineteen years old. “I cannot offer resurrection. That is beyond one such as I, and Sir Bard will not provide it either. I can offer a chance to take up arms. To leave the peace of death for the chance to face this ‘Oppressor’, thou spoke of.”

More spirits disappeared, not willing to return to the pain of existence.

“Thou shalt be bound to me, as the Ashes thee faced were, but thou shall have thy

freedoms besides. I need no slaves."

The army of hundreds of dead was reduced to ten.

Then five.

Then three.

With a final bow of thanks and a smile at the Crossbreed, Rita Wayword turned away and disappeared into the gentle embrace of Death, leaving only two spirits behind.

Both stepped forward.

Priscilla nodded at them and used her Element for the first time today.

Both figures turned material as they stepped from the peace of death and became Spirit Ashes.

"Once more, my valiant champion?" Ciara asked. In response, the Spirit Ash of Solomon Grundy lifted the dainty woman and set her on his shoulder. The Faerie Queen let out a tinkling laugh. "I see you are still the quiet actor though you be my champion no longer. Without the Black or my Faerie, I have gone from Keeper of the Dead to but a prop. I fear I will be of little use against the Oppresor's army."

"Your knowledge can help us more than your powers would have," Medea said, eyeing the pair while rubbing her chin in contemplation. "Whoever this 'oppressor' sounds like a big deal, and our Family likes to be on top of making plans for potential threats."

"If you will aid in the final battle, I have no reason to withhold my knowledge of the script," Ciara nodded but looked regretful. "I would caution that all I possess are memories. My knowledge is limited without access to the visions of the fey or the whispers of the Parliaments. My former champion may aid in battle, but I am without arms. If I may be of use to you in another fashion, Queens of Albion, please let me know."

"What is thy skill with the musical or performing arts?" Priscilla asked, an idea coming to mind.

"All actors must be able to sing and dance," Ciara said with pride.

"Then I believe thou shalt be of great use to me."

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Two Months Later

Despite the upheaval the outside world experienced in those two months, the Island's life forms remained unchanged, barring the occasional new batch of invaders.

Swamp Thing continued to form and dissolve his body over and over again. As far as Tsunade could tell, the former anti-hero was trying to connect to the Green of the Island but was unsuccessful in his attempts. He wasn't hurting anyone, and Priscilla felt

uncomfortable killing a man who wasn't a threat. Ciara knew he was an Avatar of the Green, but she did not know more than they already knew without a connection to the Parliament of Rot. Grundy was hardly a font of knowledge either. Talking to him provided no response either.

So, after the second week of no change, the Family installed some boundary fields around his location to be safe and left him alone.

The sun rose and set. Plants grew. Animals hunted, fought, killed and died in a cycle as old as life itself. If one ignored that at least half of all life forms on the Island were monsters of some sort, then one could even call those two months on the Island peaceful.

Slade Wilson, stumbling from the brush of the forest only a hundred feet from his ship, would disagree.

The former mercenary had seen better days. Of the great Deathstroke, the fearsome hitman that had landed on this Island with the rest of the suicide squad, very little was identifiable.

His clothes were little more than tatters, hanging to his body thanks to large swaths of thick leather made into makeshift belts of armour. His sword was broken, the blade acting more like a small knife as it hung from a loop of hide at his waist. His only other weapon was a crude spear he fashioned from a branch and the shattered blade of his sword.

His mask was long gone, showing his wild, unshaven face as his eyes roved over the ship he had not seen in three months. His face was sallow, with sunken eyes and cheeks showing a lack of rest and food for the many weeks he journeyed southward.

His eyes darted to and fro over the area, wary of any threat. Even now, so close to the end of his journey, he kept his guard up. Too many times had he thought himself safe only to be ambushed by Blood Bugs, Salamanders, Golems, Tree-lizards, or other nasty surprises. A trip that had taken the Suicide Squad three weeks had taken twice as long for him alone because he was constantly forced to run, hide, or avoid areas of risk.

That caution, that paranoia, was the only reason the Island had not claimed him as it had so many others. Even with excitement rising within his eyes, and hope kindling in his breast, Slade remained in control of himself.

He did not run for the ship and the portal as he wanted to, instead approaching the landing point at an arc. He moved slowly, wary of any creatures that might have made the vessel their home in the months since the group had landed.

For once, his luck held, and he found no sign of rampant wildlife or a predator. A few nests of seabirds were the only sign of animal life. Which was a good thing, as the creatures would not have built their homes in dangerous territory.

Still, no need to rush.

Between spotting the ship and actually climbing aboard, over three hours passed, such was Deathstroke's wariness. Even then, the mercenary took extra care to go through the vessel to make certain no nasty surprises lay within.

Finally, the last surviving member of the Suicide Squad stood before the large frame of the portal and activated it, bracing for any sort of trap.

Boom.

The loud sound resounded across the area as a vortex of swirling yellow energy coalesced in front of Slade.

He released a deep breath. They had only sent 'samples' through three times, so he hadn't been too concerned with its number of uses being too high, but he had been afraid that their 'mysterious backers' had trapped it to self-destruct after a certain period of time.

Even with the portal still working, it didn't mean he was out of danger.

He didn't know what was on the other side of this swirling portal, but anything was better than this hellish land.

Hands tightened around his crude spear, Slade stepped towards his freedom.

Tok.

And hit an invisible wall.

"What," Deathstroke mumbled, uncomprehending as he tried to pass through the portal again.

Only to be rebuffed by an invisible yet intractable force once more.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, nonononononNONONONO," Slade chanted as he pushed, heaved, and tried to throw himself around the invisible barrier between him and his escape from this damned hellscape. The iron control of his emotions and actions slipped as he tried to go around, to smash the barrier, to do anything to escape this terrible, terrible place.

Slade Wilson had no way of knowing that he had been trapped as soon as he had crossed the Jewel. Marked to never escape. A geas contract that ensured all who entered could never leave.

Mikael had not lied when he said everyone coming to his Island would die. Anyone who came here had malicious intent toward him and his Family, and he would not allow such loose ends to roam free. He might not be the one to kill them, but he had little tolerance for anyone or anything trying to take what was his.

When people had first landed on the Island, Mikael and Medea had performed extensive testing to ensure nobody could escape. The first few simply tried to sail away, but later incursions had various escape plans. Teleporters, portals, magic, summonings, they had tested everything they could to ensure nothing escaped. In the end, they settled

on the simplest and most complete solution.

A geas on the Jewel.

Anything that passed through the dimensional barrier be they person or item, could not be used to escape.

The portal in front of Slade would not have opened if it originated from the ship itself, as that had passed through the Jewel.

Somehow, something from outside knew precisely when and where Slade, and Spiral before him, were trying to activate the portal. It then beamed the receiving end to them. But the geas still prevented escape.

The Suicide Squad had been doomed from the start.

It didn't have to be this way. They would have been in a uniquely advantageous position if they had had complete information on the nature of the Island and Mikael.

Had they gone south instead of north and reached the barrier that separated the Family's lands from the rest of the Island, their disturbance at that boundary field would have attracted his attention. Uncaring about the distinction between hero, anti-hero, and villain, Mikael's curiosity would have driven him to ask questions after capturing them.

From there, Spiral would have been freed of the Simurgh and Mojo's control, Emma would have recognized her and the asset she could have been, and she could have lived. Hookwolf and Gavel might still have died, but the rest would be imprisoned again since they had not chosen to invade but had been forced to by others.

Mikael, always sympathetic towards those seeking their freedom, would have let them live just to fuck with Waller. And he would have loved to know about a portal that got around his safeguards.

If the Suicide Squad had not been so informationally handicapped, tragedies would have been prevented.

If the Suicide Squad had not been so informationally handicapped, they might have lived.

But none of them would.

"Mrow."

Slade froze in place, arms still raised as he pushed against the barrier.

A furry form brushed across his leg.

The Cat stood on the other side of the invisible barrier that kept the mercenary from his freedom.

"Mrow," it mewled gently as it faced him.

It had never let him go, Slade realized. Like Hookwolf, it had simply been playing with him. Watching him struggle. Waiting till he had hope of survival, only to cruelly

snatch it away at the last second.

How cat-like.

Deathstroke's last sight was the gaping void of darkness that opened impossibly wide to swallow him whole.

Of the six members who landed on the Island, only Rita Wayword had been spared the *Maw*.

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Medea was a cat.

Not a cat(?), The Cat, a cat-girl, or any other unnecessarily complicated way of describing her.

She was simply a cat.

Medea was the same as she always was, she thought as she walked through the swirling yellow portal to explore what lay on the other side.

She emerged into a large and barren room. Once there might have been something to stop her, guards, barriers, or walls, but all that remained in this cavernous room was debris, blood, and claw marks.

Her tiny wings carried her into a room that once observed the portal room behind thick glass that now lay broken in shards on the ground. Computers, files, paper, and other electronic equipment littered this room's floor. Medea spared the papers an idle glance, noting the repetition of a symbol, a red triangular DNA strand on a yellow circle, on most of the forms before walking away.

Just because she could read didn't mean she enjoyed it as much as her pet. She'd much rather find something to eat.

Casting the only spell she knew, Medea turned invisible as she left the observatory.

The Lesser-Floof had shown her this trick. It was a suitable recompense for daring to be called 'floofy' by her pet.

Medea was the Floofiest of Floofs. Her pet, Mikael, had said so repeatedly. Anyone wishing to use the title must pay tribute.

Still, all these new pets were good for something, Medea thought as she meandered through destroyed underground halls. They paid the appropriate tribute of scritches, pets, and tummy rubs.

And food.

She was just walking randomly, exploring this new place by climbing over cabinets, knocking the few computers still intact to the ground, and doing other things at her whim.

Occasionally she would come across a dead and half-eaten body, but Medea turned her nose up at them.

She was too good to eat leftovers.

Bored, Medea continued to pad softly down the halls of the ruined Cadmus.

Sure, she could turn into a dragon and bust her way out of here, but why would she? This exploration was just an idle curiosity on her part, and Medea felt no need to change who and what she was, especially something as dull as a dragon.

Dragons were just larger, scalier and uglier cats.

Before Medea had woken up in her new home, she could have chosen to become something else. An infinite list of possibilities had been presented, but she had disdained them all. She could have been a dragon then if a smaller one. But Medea derided the thought.

Cats were the best, and Medea was the best cat. Ergo, she didn't need to change at all.

The only concession she made was to allow tiny wings to grow. It just made finding napping spots easier.

Like now.

Medea stared up a destroyed elevator shaft, then looked down.

Down was easier than up, so she went down. Her tiny wings carried her to the bottom and through an open elevator door.

Medea's distaste for this new environment grew as she looked at more destroyed rooms, furniture, and dried blood.

Her new pets were also helpful in keeping her house clean, Medea acknowledged internally. And the one named after her, the one with the pointy ears, was also good for giving her treats.

The others gave her food, so she tolerated their monopolizing of Mikeal's time, but the Non-Floofy-Medea gave the best treats. Those red pills were the highlight of every meal.

Still, Mikeal was her favourite pet.

Not only because he had been with her the longest but because he didn't just give her treats. He gave her Meals.

At the thought of one of Mikael's tentacles, Medea's stomach rumbled.

That snack earlier hadn't done anything for her stomach. He had been an afterthought, kept alive to provide entertainment and because she had been full for the first time in a while. She hadn't eaten him earlier because she was still digesting the 'Shards' of the other two.

The metal wolf had gone down easily enough after a nap, and the big man's would have done the same since they were both only the size of a continent. But then Medea had

also eaten one larger than a planet right after.

That had taken a while to digest, even for her.

Mikael had been worried when she hadn't eaten more than one tentacle. Medea didn't bother explaining to him that she was full.

It wasn't the job of pets to worry about their owners.

Still, now she was feeling a bit peckish. One of the reasons she had left that snack alone for so long was because she hoped he would lead her to more morsels, but this place was a dud.

Just as Medea was about to open a Door to return home and demand tribute from her pets, she sensed movement.

Deciding another minute wouldn't kill her, Medea padded her way down a dark hall.

As she approached, the cat heard the sound of eating, of bloody flesh being torn and gnawed on. A scramble of claws on metal and bone being crunched by teeth.

A thick metal gate tried to block her, but Medea just had to nibble a little to carve her way through the feet-thick steel.

On the other side was a familiar sight.

One of those Maneater Boars, the ones with the dozens of eyes, that were great fun to chase. Well, her pet dragons would chase them.

Medea, as befitting of her status of Floofiest of Floofs, would ride those dragons and accept their sacrifice as a light snack.

But something else was eating this boar.

A white mouse with a four-foot frame that dwarfed Medea in size continued to consume more of the dead pig's body. Already it had carved a good chunk from the animal, despite it being over thirty times its mass.

Medea watched the mouse eat with distaste, blood, meat and bone raining down around it.

"Mrow," she ordered it to stop. Its crude waste of food was appalling to a gourmet like her.

The mouse froze, looking up from its bloody meal. Thirteen glowing blue eyes looked at Medea menacingly. Its scaled tail swirled behind it as it rose to its full height and let out a rumbling squeak.

Medea was unimpressed.

The rats on the Island were much larger.

How dare this puny rodent try and speak against her, the Floofiest of Floofs.

So Medea decided to teach the rodent of unusual size a lesson by opening her *Maw*.

The black void consumed the mouse, the boar, and most of the room.

Licking her paws clean on the floor that had once been steel, now bare stone, Medea gave a lazy stretch.

Then she opened a Door home and walked through.

It didn't matter if she had wings, could turn into a dragon, was the embodiment of Hunger, or that she was Tier 9 thanks to all her 'treats'. When confronted with a mouse getting uppity, there was only one thing to do.

After all, Medea was a cat.

Author's Note:

So ends Probation. Perspective hopped around a bit more than I would like this chapter, but I couldn't think of another way to convey all I wanted. As it is, I cut over 2k words from this chapter to make it flow better and still ended up around the 11k mark.

This was the most experimental of my mini-arcs so far. I explained last time how it was a study in contrast, the wish-fulfillment of the Family vs. the (literal) horror tropes of the Suicide Squad. Through the medium of Medea (cat), I also got to try my hand at a new genre without sacrificing the story's main plot. I also explored a different way to tell a Suicide Squad story.

The normal conceit of a Suicide Squad story is that, despite the name of the team and their villain/anti-hero status, the squad usually survives and escapes. I decided to try something a bit different with Probation.

What if Waller's plan goes perfectly? If the Suicide Squad goes in, accomplishes the goal, and then dies as intended, is the world better for it?

By the very nature of a Suicide Squad story, the members are supposed to be disposable. Of the six members, only two died on screen in this story. Not only is this another horror trope I got to use, but it also shows how Waller thinks of them. It doesn't matter if they get a big, climatic sendoff. That isn't their role. They do the job and then die. That is it.

I fully expect this part to be controversial because of these ideas I am trying, but I'll stick with it.

What is fanfiction but a place to explore new ideas with familiar characters and places?

I'll see you next week with a Side Story.

PS: To clarify a bit for those unaware of the intricacies of the various colours in DC (The Green, The Red, Clear, Grey, Black… etc.). They are all facets of life, even the Grey and Black, even if those two work with 'undead.' Combining with the Faerie Queen's Shard-based powers led to a very powerful Avatar of the Black, whose shades were neither alive nor dead. Something Priscilla, knowing about hollows and with her new Element and her gentle nature, couldn't stand.

SIDE STORY XII:
SURGING CURRENT

And everybody knows that the Plague is coming
Everybody knows that it's moving fast
Everybody knows that the naked man and woman
Are just a shining artifact of the past
Everybody knows the scene is dead
But there's gonna be a meter on your bed
That will disclose
What everybody knows

Mindful of her image, even with only a few onlookers, Artoria only ordered a light snack.

"A blueberry muffin, a breakfast sandwich, a slice of banana bread, and a kiwi smoothie." It wouldn't do to seem like a glutton, after all.

"Of-of course, ma'am, your majesty," the poor waitress stuttered, writing the order down with a trembling hand.

"I will just have a Flat White," Robin interjected with a kind smile, taking pity on the poor woman who was clearly nervous in their presence.

"And I will have the same, thank you," Wonder Woman, the local version, said as well.

"Right away, princess," the young woman hurriedly nodded up and down as if a bird picking at the ground before scurrying off to complete their orders.

Despite the small scene the trio had caused, there were few other patrons in the small cafe this early in the morning. It was barely six thirty in New Zealand, and the only people up and about at this hour were few and far between.

So when Nico Robin, Artoria Pendragon, and Wonder Woman walked into the cafe after an eventful night, the teenage waitress, the cook, and an elderly couple were the only ones present. All four were shooting the women looks while trying to be discreet, but none of the trio were bothered. The smell of freshly ground beans after the chill spring air was invigorating after their long night.

"Thank you for your aid," Diana said to Robin as they waited for their orders.

"It was no issue," the former pirate said with an easygoing smile. "I was in the area, and search and rescue comes relatively easy to me."

"There is no need to denigrate your accomplishment," Artoria chided gently. "You saved a number of lives that would have been lost had you not stepped up."

"We may be able to lift a ship, but even we cannot be in multiple places at once,"

Diana agreed. “That is a powerful and helpful ability you possess. I am envious.”

“It is quite rare for me to be thanked, so I will simply accept it this time,” Robin smiled wryly. “For the longest time, I was unable to swim despite spending most of my life at sea. Rescuing drowning people. Being thanked. People jealous of my power rather than scared. It has been a night of firsts.”

“If you wished, it would not be the last,” Diana said persuasively. “The world always needs more heroes. You could do a lot of good.”

“I don’t think I can be a hero. I’d have to share my meat,” Robin giggled.

“Meat?” Diana asked, confused by the non-sequitur.

“Sorry. An old joke from my old crew,” Robin waived it off. “They did great things in our world, but we were not heroes. Never wanted to be either. We were just dreamers, and any good we did was tangential to our own goals. Our captain, in particular, hated being called a hero. He always said that heroes share their meat, and he refused to share any meat, so he couldn’t be a hero.”

“That is… one definition of a hero,” Diana said, still looking a bit perplexed.

“He sounds like a wise man,” Artoria nodded, understanding the deeper connotations of Monkey D. Luffy’s words thanks to the numerous times Robin had spoken of her former friends. To be a hero was to sacrifice.

“Uh… Pardon me,” the waitress spoke up hesitantly, holding a tray of drinks and food. “Your orders.”

“Thank you,” Diana received her drink with poise, and the other two did the same, Artoria digging into her food with efficient movements. At once classy, as it was horrifically quick.

“That actually brings me to why I asked you here,” Robin continued after sipping her drink lightly. “I do not know if the others have told you, but I am an archeologist.”

“I did not know that,” Wonder Woman responded. “Your family is notorious for keeping each other’s secrets. I should not be surprised, though. I suppose we all thought you were warriors rather than people with jobs.”

“While we all possess combat capabilities, only about half of us use it in our day-to-day lives beyond standard training to keep in top form,” Robin explained.

Medea was a researcher. Tsunade considered herself a medic before a kunoichi. Emma was a businesswoman. Thanks to the lack of Grimm, Glynda felt herself more of a teacher than a huntress. Priscilla, a ‘bard’. Even Ranni thought of herself as more of a ‘ruler’ or mage than an active combatant. Melina was still finding her place in the world. Yoruichi straddled the line thanks to her spy work, but it was only Scathach, Artoria, and Diana that actively sought out combat situations.

Mikael considered himself ‘the greatest hobo to ever live.’

His words, not hers.

“I’ve been in New Zealand for the WWI exhibit at the local museum,” Robin continued. “It holds an artifact relating to my current field of study.”

“Atlantis?” Artoria asked in between bites.

“The local curator claims it to only be a photo of soldiers, but I believe one of them to be an Atlantean,” Robin nodded before looking at Wonder Woman. “Please tell me everything you know about that civilization.”

“I am afraid I don’t know much. The name is familiar, of course, but that is it. I have made no study of it nor remember any of my sisters speaking of it at length. I simply thought they were even more reclusive than my people.”

“They weren’t,” Robin shook her head and sighed. “They actually had a robust trade system with civilizations on land, likely due to limits of material found underwater. Then all traces of them disappeared between thirty and forty years ago. I am trying to uncover why. Nothing sticks out to you?”

“Apologies, but nothing does. What makes you think I could help you,” the Amazonian asked with a curious frown. “And why not ask my counterpart?”

“Because she knows about the Atalantis of her world, not this one. In her world, the city continued to exist in the ocean until the end, whereas, in this world, there is no proof of its survival past the 20th century. Their reclusivity can explain the lack of evidence, and Mikael’s efforts in the ocean tragically removed any ruins that might still have existed.”

“But why me?”

“Wonder Woman is well known to have fought in WWII. In fact, there is a photo of you at the exhibit,” Robin replied with a raised brow. “I had hoped you had met with an Atlantean during your time. Also, the deities of your religion are reported to be the ones to have cast it down in mythology.”

“My mother held the title of Wonder Woman at that time. We look similar,” Diana explained. “I am one of the youngest amazons, and I did not leave my home until slightly before the turn of the millennia. I, unfortunately, cannot help you.”

“Truly,” the King of Knights asked in surprise, finished with her food and sipping at her smoothie. “Diana, our version, first left her home to aid in the world war and continued to act as a hero for the next century.”

“As Robin said, there are differences between worlds,” Wonder Woman smiled wryly.

It was a constant point of confusion ever since her ‘twin’ had shown up. For every threat she had told them about ahead of time that managed to pay off, two more were either completely unknown to her or were different in this world.

“And your home has no records of Atlantis?” The archeologist pressed. “No trade passed between your lands? Invoices? Records? No diplomatic envoys? What of your mother? May I speak with her? Or your gods? According to Diana, Atlantis venerated Poseidon, your deity of the seas. Would he know?”

“I imagine Lord Poseidon would know something, as might my mother,” Diana allowed. “The former, I am afraid, I cannot aid you in contacting. It is not up to us to dictate to the gods. On the other hand, my mother should be willing to answer some questions on the subject when you visit.”

“Visit?” Artoria asked.

“She wished to speak with my counterpart as well as her ‘husband’.” Neither of the other women at the table commented on how the amazonian said the word oddly. Both could imagine how disconcerting it was to meet a version of yourself in such an unusual relationship as theirs. “It is why I wished to speak with him yesterday, to tender a formal invitation to Themyscria. I do not believe my mother or the rest of my people will begrudge a few more members of your family visiting as well. Despite our isolation, they are quite curious about the outside world.”

“You invited Mikael to your home,” Robin asked in disbelief. “Your home filled with strong, opinionated, religious, women who have had barely any contact with the rest of the world for millennia. Our husband, the god killer in a polyamorous relationship with a dozen women, Mikael?”

“Yes?” Diana squirmed in her seat at the intense look the other two gave her. “Should I not have? He promised his best behaviour, and my counterpart vouched for his conduct.”

“That will either end in a comedy or tragedy,” Robin giggled behind her hand.

“What my friend means,” Artoria said with a slight glare at the former pirate. “Is that Sir Mikael will do his best to honour his word. But he is… opinionated. And his sense of humour is an acquired taste. He is also not one to suffer injustice against himself and his family without reprisals.”

“He is a petty man who likes to mess with people, is too fond of puns, cannot stand gods, and, in his words, ‘is a firm believer in gender equality’,” Robin ‘translated’.

“You believe I should rescind the invitation?” Diana asked, her frown deepening. “My mother will not be happy. She was quite insistent on meeting with him and my counterpart. If he believes in gender equality, I fail to see how that would be a demerit.”

“The gender thing is a joke of his. Means he doesn’t look down on women. He treats them just like men.”

“And that is a bad thing?”

“No,” Artoria denied firmly.

One of her favourite aspects of Sir Mikael was how he did not try and coddle any of them despite being of the opposite sex. Modern 'chivalry' might mean particular courtly behaviour towards the fairer sex, but she had lived as a man for too long for her to be comfortable being on the receiving end of such actions.

"If we take last night as an example," Robin elaborated. "If a ship is sinking, it wouldn't be 'women and children first', it would be 'children and parents first'. He just doesn't care about gender. Mikael is apathetic about many things most people find a concern, and sometimes that clashes with people who do care about such subjects. That is why I said it would be a comedy or a tragedy."

"I see," Diana idly ran her finger along the rim of her cup. "So I should not worry about him, but how my sisters would react to him."

"If he promised to be on his best behaviour, he will be," Robin nodded. "He keeps his word as best as he can, even if he can twist it to his favour. He'll still make jokes and be himself, but he won't deliberately antagonize anyone, nor will he denigrate your beliefs so long as they are not thrown in his face. Just warn your mother and your people that he gives what he receives."

"He will meet insult with insult, violence with violence," Artoria nodded. "But he will also repay hospitality, aide, advice, or support just a surely. No greater foe or trustworthy ally have I ever met." No matter how much he claimed to be a monster, Artoria only had to look at his actions to know who Sir Mikael really was.

"I will keep it in mind," Diana said thoughtfully.

"I thought men were not allowed on your island," Robin asked curiously as she finished her coffee.

"That was the law until my mother left and saw how man's world had changed. Since then, she has been more lenient. No man can live on the island or come uninvited, but in unique circumstances, they may spend a day or two as a guest. Superman, for example, has visited once before. Thanks to this policy, some of my more… extreme sisters have relaxed their harsh views. Please ensure your husband does not make my mother regret her leniency."

"We'll make sure he has a minder," Robin said with a smile as she stood from her seat and went to pay.

"We'll both be there, as will Diana and perhaps Lady Ranni," Artoria decided. "She is one of the best at navigating his moods and humour to ensure he maintains decorum."

"I will have to consult with my mother and our oracle before I can say she will be allowed past the barrier. This is the first time a foreign deity will visit, so I am unsure of the procedure," Diana said as she thought of the blue goddess. Then another thought came

to her. “Medea will not be with you, will she?”

“She will not,” Artoria declared. As much as she loved the Caster and respected her advice, she could think of no poorer idea than bringing the witch to a seat of power for the Greek gods.

“Good,” Diana let out a sigh. “I have nothing against her personally, as I do not know her. My people, on the other hand, have met my world’s version of her before Themyscria was founded as a haven. She was… cruel in their stories, and I do not wish to open old wounds.”

“Don’t worry about Medea,” Robin said, returning to the pair and leading them out of the cafe. They passed a pair of early-morning joggers who stumbled to a stop at the sight of the trio. “She won’t be there. If I were you, I’d be more worried about Mikael seducing your mother.”

“What?” Diana blinked in confusion, wide-eyed at the thought. Then she turned to the blonde king. “He wouldn’t dare, would he?”

“There is nothing Sir Mikael doesn’t dare do,” Artoria said with a tight smile. “But he will never cheat on us. Of that, I have complete confidence. So, no, he will not seduce your mother.”

Diana sighed in relief, only for that sigh to become a choke as the air caught in her throat.

“Deliberately, at least,” Artoria continued as her smile fell, her face neutrally blank. “Sir Mikael did manage to unintentionally seduce a dozen women. And he has expressed multiple times he prefers independent women, those in positions of power, and maturity in demeanour and age. He is quite like my knights in that manner. He may subconsciously do his best to worm his way into her heart and bed.”

“Please tell me you are joking,” Diana almost begged, looking from the blank blonde to the smirking brunette. “There is no way that is going to happen. She will not fall for a man in a relationship with other women.”

“Funny you should say that,” Artoria said blandly. “Our Diana said something similar to me once when I asked if she would ever fall in love with him.”

There was a beat of silence.

“I-I have to go. I will see you later.” Wonder Woman took off in a hurry, flying as fast as she could.

Another beat of silence.

Then Robin could hold it in no longer and had to cover her mouth as she started giggling. Artoria allowed her blank mask to fade into a slight smile and a few chuckles to escape.

“That was cruel,” Robin said, still laughing as they opened a Door to the Island and stepped through. “Funny, but cruel. She’s going to warn them now about his ‘lechery’. It’s going to make things worse when he visits.”

“You started it,” Artoria defended with a smile. “And nothing I said was wrong. Technically.”

“I thought you’d deny it, not play along,” Robin disagreed. “Mikael is a terrible influence on you.”

Artoria didn’t bother to deny that. The pair was silent momentarily before the King of Knights asked the question on her mind.

“…You don’t think he will, right?”

Just because Sir Mikael wouldn’t cheat doesn’t mean she wanted the drama. If something of that nature did happen, it would alienate their new allies fast. It was issues like this that led to the fall of Camelot.

“As you said, she sounds like his type,” Robin’s smile was sharklike. “A Greek comedy or a Greek tragedy? How exciting.”

Artoria was feeling decidedly less excited than her friend.

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This was it, Sinister thought as he stared down at the blood sample.

His eyes panned over the small group of cages with mice in them. They all looked hale and healthy, though one was naturally larger than the others. Its beady eyes met his, its scaled tail waiving behind it in agitation, and he smiled.

This was what he had been searching for all this time.

Humanity’s next great leap forward.

The next rung on the ladder of evolution.

For so long, he had been focused on mutants. Those with the x-gene were so obviously superior to baseline humans that it was obvious they had been the next step. Unlike aliens, which went through entirely separate evolutionary lines or those whose powers derived from a random stroke of fate thanks to the presence of a brain tumour, mutants were consistent. Scientific.

While their powers varied, it was in their genes that the future would be written. Occasionally, a mutant parent would produce a dud offspring, but with each year that passed, more Super powers appeared in this world. It was becoming increasingly clear that baseline humans would be bred out.

A common misconception about evolution was that it was the strongest that survived.

That was wrong. It was the most prolific breeders that passed on their DNA. That usually meant the stronger member of the species as they had the most advantages, but not always. Numbers, mating tactics, or even bad luck could see the most robust or most intelligent members of species fail to pass on their genes.

It didn't matter if an individual was born with opposable thumbs if that creature never had descendants to inherit the trait.

But there came a tipping point. Where a particular gene was spread so wide and offered such a significant advantage that even if the new 'genus' was outnumbered, it became impossible to stop the spread. Then nature would take its course, and the old species would be extinct.

Nathaniel Essex didn't even have to do anything but sit and watch as humanity died and their superiors took their place.

Once he realized this, he ceased his focus on eliminating humanity and focused on his true goal.

Pushing the species forward.

Humanity would be gone in a generation or two, and mutants would be the baseline. Thus, he focused on producing the next step.

It had taken hundreds of thousands of years for mutants to supplant homo sapiens.

Sinister, as his dead wife once called him, was hoping that through his efforts, the next step in evolution would be in a few centuries. A millennium at most.

To do that, his first step had been to create the perfect mutant.

He had some initial success through selective breeding, focusing the most desirable traits into a few families he carefully monitored. The Summer-Grey lines were supposed to be the pinnacle of the coming generation. A mutant unlike any other before.

Then Jean Grey died.

A hitch in the plan, but not an insurmountable one. Madelyn Prior, a clone of Grey, had been able to take the original's role quickly enough at his direction.

Their child wouldn't be the messianic figure Sinister had hoped and planned for, as children of clones were always slightly inferior to those produced naturally and tended to be infertile. Still, the scientist hoped he could learn from the children the couple produced. Enough to make up for the loss of Jean Grey.

The first of such children would be born soon too.

Which left Nathaniel Essex some time on his hands.

Time he had used to check up on a few other genetic projects in the world.

With all his money, investing in research and development had helped him in unexpected ways over the years. Other people's work might be inferior to his, but it could

give him some inspiration if nothing else.

Cadmus had, initially, been only one of a dozen experiments he had helped fund. Their focus on cloning had been… cute. Behind his experiments by at least a decade, but novel. The knowledge they gained on Kryptonian DNA had been interesting, at least.

Then they had managed to snag a few drops of the Elden Lord's blood. After watching the Revival Video, as it was called, Sinister decided to kill a few months studying it while he waited for the next phase of his mutant messiah plans.

And he had found the holy grail of genetics.

Sure, he could not get any information from the sample itself, and it had proved immune to all cloning attempts, even from his own more advanced tech, but the effects it had on other organisms had been worth it.

It made everything more than it was before. Better. No rejection, no exceptions.

It was a universal donor in the greatest sense.

And he needed more!

So he had nudged the PRT head to get more samples, and the results were everything he had dreamed of.

"What do you have for me, Essex?" Amanda Waller asked as she entered his lab.

It always amused him how people thought positions equalled power. They could be useful, certainly, but it didn't matter if you gave a monkey a title.

It was still just a monkey.

"It has been a complete success, Director," Sinister responded, not hiding his glee at his discoveries. "The samples we've received are exactly what we were looking for."

"Explain," the head of the PRT ordered with a frown. "I was told the deliveries were not producing results."

"They were fascinating and can produce results in the long run," the mutant defended. Sure, the creatures' blood had been nowhere near the Elden Lords' own in usefulness, but their genetics were worth the study. The director didn't seem to think so as she frowned at him. "If we manage to breed the batch of lizard-like creatures, we can have a functionally infinite supply of crystal, but you are correct that the first two deliveries were not what we were searching for. "

"And the most recent delivery?"

"At first, another failure," Sinister admitted begrudgingly. "Five creatures, all from the Sus-genus based at first appearance." At her blank look, he rolled his eyes, dumbing down his language for his audience. "Pigs. Three small ones, the size of our domestic breed, one the size of a small SUV, and one large enough to pass for a train car. Despite the gigantism, testing on the first four yielded little of interest."

“And the fifth?”

“You can see it,” Sinister pointed and led the woman to the armoured glass that looked out over a vast, barren room.

The boar was massive, twice a man’s height and over fifteen yards long. It was equally as disgusting. Fat rolled its skin in bunches, and its bloated gut hung to the floor. The dozens of round pustules covered its face to the point that Sinister suspected it couldn’t see. No matter how much those boils looked like *eyes*.

The animal was gorging itself bloody on its latest meal, four whole cows they had delivered to the pen through a secure containment tube.

“That is your ‘complete success’?” Waller said with barely disguised disgust. “A sick, fat pig.”

“Pigs are remarkably similar to humans on a genetic level,” Sinister didn’t hide his derision at her ignorance. “To the point that insulin for treating diabetes was originally made from their pancreas and modern organs are grown from them for human transplantation.”

“How does this help us?” Waller pressed, not taking his tone lying down. “It has none of the traits of the mouse you showed me. No draconification.”

“While its blood lacks the reptile strands the Elden Lord’s contained, the ‘dragon-trait,’ if you want to be crude, it does share one trait with it. Its blood is also a universal donor that enhances any organism that is injected with it.”

“Really,” the woman said, staring at the eating boar with renewed interest. “So…?”

“Early testing suggests that recipients of its blood grow stronger over continued injection. Not only that, the injection of blood heals wounds and diseases. All of them.”

“All of them?” Waller asked, a look of genuine shock overcoming her.

“All of them,” Sinister’s grin was wide and feral. “Cancerous cells. Amputation. Diabetes. Muscle atrophy. The common cold. It fixes it all. The amount of blood is proportional to the amount of tissue it needs to repair, but so long as we have enough blood, we can cure everything.”

“And the enhancement element?”

“Lesser than the Elden Lord’s blood,” Sinister admitted, nodding over to the group of cages with the lab rats. “But still present and noticeable. And with this creature’s vitality, we can extract tens of litres of blood a day without killing it.” Of course, he didn’t say that most of that blood went to his own supply. Cadmus didn’t even notice the discrepancy. “Our current working hypothesis is a diversity of creatures is the basis for his strength and size. Beasts like this boar strengthen and empower him through continually ingesting their blood. Then he uses others, possibly draconic, to further that empowerment. Over

millennia, he reached his current size and strength."

"That would fit with what he described in his interview about being born weak. Assuming he wasn't lying. Either way, do everything you can to keep that pig alive and healthy," Waller ordered. "We have no way of connecting with the team gathering samples, so we cannot count on receiving more."

"We will progress to human testing within the week," Sinister informed her. It was way earlier than recommended, but he wasn't bothered by potential losses. They were just humans, after all. "Will you send in another team now that we know what to look for?"

Sinister briefly considered inserting some of his cloned forces before dismissing the thought. There was no need to risk attracting the Elden Lord's attention when the PRT proved such a useful tool.

"Possibly," Waller said with a frown. "But not for a few months, at least. The squad was chosen after careful deliberation. In the meantime, keep that pig alive and producing blood."

"Very well," Sinister planned on doing so anyway, but making humans feel like they were in control was important to ensure they did as told. That, and it amused him. Like a small dog yipping at large ones.

"I want to be updated on any other delivery," Waller ordered as she left. "Especially any discoveries of anything draconic. If we assume your idea is true, the wider our sample base, the better our results."

"Of course," Sinister nodded, not bidding farewell to his 'boss'.

As soon as she had left the room, he turned back to look at the draconic mouse in the cage. Its eyes had never left him.

If a few drops of blood could turn an ordinary lab rat into such a creature, what would it do to the pinnacle of mutant kind?

Nathaniel Essex's original plan would have been to create the perfect mutant and then, from there, ensure they bred. Over centuries, regular mutants would be replaced by their superiors. Then he'd repeat the process, over and over, driving evolution higher with each successive species.

Until it could go no higher. The pinnacle of evolution.

It was a dream that would take thousands of years at a conservative estimate.

Unless he could speed it up by taking the current population to a new height. By making them *more*. ***Greater***.

Essex would keep his plan regarding the next step for mutant kind as it was still the most reliable, but now he had another option. As far as he could tell, this blood did not change the underlying being. Just made them better. What would that mean if that was

applied to the strongest mutants?

Ascension**.**

But first, more experiments. It would not do to waste this opportunity because he was rash.

With one last look at the eating boar and a shake of his head, the geneticist returned to work.

Those pustules really did look like *eyes*, now that he thought of it.

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"You know, I am usually fine with your plans," Clark said as he held up the small pill to the light. "But you're going to need to walk me through this one. How is poisoning ourselves going to help?"

"Mikael absorbs the blood of those he kills. That is how he grows stronger," Batman said, pulling up a short clip on his Batcomputer. Taken during the Trigon incident, it looped over and over, showing the subject they were talking about standing on a beach covered in blood. "It is not poison for us, but when mixed with blood and exposed to air, it combusts. Preventing him from absorbing any power from us. It will stay in your system for a month before you need to take another."

"Dragon vampire, right," Clark nodded slowly before sighing and swallowing the pill. If nothing else, it would hopefully stop all those crazy scientists trying to get Kryptonian DNA.

"Poisons do not work on Mikael or his retinue," Batman continued. "The 'Defences', according to Glory Girl, are extensive. Combined with his intangibility, it makes any potential conflict with him difficult."

"But not impossible." Clark was familiar enough with his friend to understand the subtext. "You have a plan."

"To strike, he needs to release his intangibility. It is why he did not confront Trigon with his dragon body. He can be dimensionally shifted and safe or physically present and attack. Not both. His speed is also nothing to worry about without a lead-up. He could not stop you from taking the jug of alcohol from his hand. It is why his speed slowed as he approached earth. He can travel faster than the speed of light if given enough time and momentum, but before then, you, Diana, the Flash, or a few others will be much faster."

"So we can theoretically win if it came to a fight with him alone," the Kryptonian nodded, following his friend's train of thought. "But if it comes to that, we have already lost. The earth will be gone. And he won't fight alone."

“I am still working on the contingencies for the other members of his family,” Batman admitted grudgingly. “Too little is known about them. But you are correct. Confronting Mikael at this point would be foolish.”

Clark smiled to himself as he looked at his surly friend. He believed these little threat assessments and planning sessions were helpful and had saved their lives numerous times. Still, he did wish they didn’t include potential allies. It felt unfair to expect everyone to turn into an enemy, not giving them a chance to be forces for good.

Still, Bruce had been… better since talking to his parents.

He was still Batman, calculating, dour, paranoid, and cautious to a fault, but to those who knew him and truly understood the man under the cowl, it was obvious something had changed.

Alfred had put it best; ‘I am glad to see you smile again, Master Wayne.’

As Mikael predicted, the caped crusader still did not trust the dragon, but it was no longer an obsessive drive to uncover every secret and weakness. Batman, for the moment at least, was content to let things play out.

The fact he had the basis of a contingency plan also helped, as he probably felt less helpless.

“Will you be attending the gala?” Superman asked.

“Bruce Wayne will be there with his donation,” Batman nodded. “How are you going?”

“As Superman,” Clark said. “Lois won’t be attending. She’ll be with Jon. Might as well gather larger donations.”

While the Kryptonian preferred to help people directly, he understood that encouraging philanthropy from the wealthy went a long way to helping feed the poor and destitute who were left after an Endbringer attack. A night talking to wealthy guests was little sacrifice compared to the potential benefit it brought the victims.

“Will you bring a date?”

“No,” Batman denied. “Bringing Selina would be too risky and tempting. Both for her and the guests’ valuables.”

Clark’s smile turned into a grin. It was stuff like this that showed the change. Bruce Wayne was a notorious playboy, and Batman usually maintained that cover with arm candy for the night. Going stag would set the rumour mills and tabloids running. The only reason he wouldn’t bring a date was if he was actually trying to make things work with the former burglar. Something Clark had been trying to get him to do for years.

“How’s Dick?”

“Training,” Batman responded bruskly. “He is part of the PRT, not the League.”

As if that would stop him from keeping an eye on his former protege and his teammates after the traumatic events at Diamond Heights. Or when he was being trained by Glynda Goodwitch.

Batman might be playing ball with the Elden Lord, but he was a serial worrier. The fact that he was so terse on the subject meant there was nothing for him to criticize.

“Anything else today?” Clark asked instead of continuing that line of dialogue.

“Zatara got back to me,” Batman reported. “All divine communication has been cut off. With Thor’s continued absence, some threat has likely necessitated his remaining on Asgard. Shazam is also AWOL. Many of his powers are divine based. I have a few other agents investigating, but be on your guard. We’ll alert the League when we know more.”

“Got it,” Superman grimaced. Dealing with magic or divinity was always a pain. Hopefully, whatever the issue could be solved soon. Thor and Shazam were two of their greatest fighters against the Endbringers.

“I also heard back from Captain Marvel. She is still looking to learn more about other civilizations Mikael has interacted with, but she has heard some disturbing rumours. The Phoenix is on a rampage which has the Shi’ar worried, and an unknown military force is active. They appear on a planet, ransack it looking for something, then disappear. That’s all I have for now, but she’ll keep her ears open for more.”

“It’s one thing after another,” Clark sighed. Knowing about potential threats was always better than remaining ignorant, but it could be disheartening. The sheer size and population of the wider universe ensured there would never be a time when Batman would tell him ‘everything is peaceful.’ “After the next Endbringer attack, I’ll try and find Lobo. He likes to know everything and everyone.”

All he could do was work hard to make it slightly better than the day before.

“If they follow the pattern, the earliest time will be after Thanksgiving next week, and the latest will be mid-December.”

“And if they do, it will be Behemoth,” Superman grimaced. The largest and first Endbringer was a sore spot for him. Its ability to manipulate energy meant it could replicate Kryptonite radiation as well. He’d be on rescue duty rather than help in the fight. “Whatever Mikael did to kill the Simurgh, let’s hope he can do it again.”

“Unlikely,” Batman said grimly. “The only reason he could eat it was because it was outside earth’s atmosphere. If he tried to do the same to Behemoth or Leviathan, he would destroy more than they ever would. But their aid, if they choose to give it, will go a long way to reducing casualties. Especially their healer.”

“They’ll help,” Clark said with surety.

They might not be heroes, but they were good people.

He was certain of that.

Author's Note:

A shorter SS to touch base with a few characters and set up later parts of the story. Robin continues her search while being the chaos gremlin she sometimes is in the show. Mr. Sinister is sinistering, unwittingly discovering the 'pig fisting' farm of Bloodborne (google it if you've never played. It's a real thing), and we see Batman after some graveyard therapy. As is evident, this and the next SS occur during the weeks of Probation, not after.

Before I say anything else, I have some news.

I will be travelling internationally for a few weeks in mid-May. What this means is that, for those two weeks, I will not be posting anything. Rather than start part 4 and then pause mid-way through, I will start it when I return. So next week will be another smut SS, then some omakes leading to the 12th when I leave, as I won't have time for an entire chapter.

Then I will return with the first chapter for the last part of Volume 2: Tribunal, on the 2nd of June.

That out of the way, I want to address a few things that have come up after the end of the last arc. Feel free to skip it if you don't want to hear about my train of thought while writing. I can be long-winded when I want to be.

First of all, if you did not enjoy this arc, that is fine. Understandable even. As I said, it was my most experimental. Even if you didn't like it, I hope you stay with RR, as the story is nowhere near complete.

I will clarify two points, however.

First, those claiming that the island's events are not in character.

My goal with RR has always been to keep characters as they are in their base media. If anything changes with them, it is because of the story's events, not my handwaving it away for PLOT reasons. As I constantly try to improve, any more areas you wish to point out as OOC are welcome.

Now let me tell you my logic on why I consider their actions as perfectly in character.

I will put it plainly. Nobody in the Family is evil. Or even malignant. Not even the cat. I did not choose a housecat as the 'monster' because of memes, tropes, or because I thought it would be funny (even if it was). I did it because that is what they are. The average housecat is one of nature's most efficient and cruel hunters. Most don't kill to eat. They do it for fun. I have seen my cat crush a mouse's spine and watched it try and crawl away. (The inspiration for Hookwolf's fate).

As I wrote in the last chapter, Medea is just a cat. A powerful one, slightly more intelligent, but still a cat. Humans are just prey to her. Nothing special besides that those with superpowers fill her stomach more. She treats the Family as pets and servants, just as we might have a pet

goldfish despite eating other fish. There is affection, even love if you squint, but she is not human and thus lacks human morality.

As for how the 'good' members of the Family wouldn't stand for the cat-eating humans, let me ask you this; Do they know? I don't remember writing that. In fact, I explicitly stated that Artoria and Diana, the two most 'moral' characters, spend very little time on the Island. And even if they did, at most, it would cause a little argument between the characters about trying to get her to stop before giving up. All cat owners know you can't control them.

It is important to remember that what we, as readers, know is not what the characters know. Nobody in the Family knows about a portal that works when all others they've tested fail. They have no idea that Medea (cat) was able to leave the island for a little bit.

Secondly, it is essential to remember who is dying here. These are not innocent civilians or casual bystanders. If they were, then yes, the women would definitely object. Not just the 'heroes' but all of them but Emma, Medea (the witch), and Ranni. Mikael would also object, though less on moral grounds than the optics of the situation. The people dying are either villains or foreign invaders. They all have malicious intent or cannot get to the Island.

Invaders like the people King Arthur killed in the thousands to defend Britain. Her legend is built on the corpses of men like them. Invaders like the men who pillaged and rapped the Amazonian homeland before Themyscria that Diana grew up hearing about. She would be the most resistant to the idea, but even she has killed people.

Hell, Batman might not kill people, but he has canonically let them die. I don't think Diana not caring about the fate of people invading her home is out of character at all.

Neither of the 'good' characters has much pity for people like that.

As a final note on the characterization of the Family, only Medea has even interacted with the invaders and only a few of them. This entire thing started because she was trying to create a body for Mikael. Since then, they have gone largely ignored. The Family doesn't kill them. They don't help them. They chose to come to the Island so they could just live there for all the Family cares. The only exception this time was because Swamp Thing and the Faerie Queen were valid threats they couldn't ignore, unlike the others.

I think it is perfectly in character for even Wonder Woman to be ambivalent about the fate of people actively trying to harm her Family. She might be a hero, but she is not Superman. She, canonically, has a body count.

That was the first point of two I wanted to address, but it ran too long, so I'll get off my soapbox after a quick note on the second subject.

For those who consider Probation a waste of time, let me state my opinion: I have tens of ideas for arcs, thanks to how much DC/Marvel/Worm gives me to play with. Some arcs ideas I find funny, sad, interesting, or just plain cool. Of all those ideas, I have to choose only a few

unless I want RR to never end. So each arc is only written after careful deliberation on three things. Its themes, its characters, and its importance to the overall story.

I, as the author, consider Probation the most critical story arc I have written so far in Volume 2. Only below part 4 of Volume 1 in importance for this entire fic. The trails I've laid in this arc will lead us straight to the end I have envisioned.

I hope you will be there to read it.

I will see you all next week.

SIDE STORY XIII:
CARNAL LESSONS (ADULT)

Oh yeah, t-t-teacher stop that screamin'
Teacher don't you see? Don't wanna be no uptown fool
Maybe I should go to hell but I am doing well
Teacher needs to see me after school
I think of all the education that I've missed
But then my homework was never quite like this
Ow! Got it bad, got it bad, got it bad
I'm hot for teacher
I've got it bad, so bad
I'm hot for teacher

"Are you ready for the last surprise of the night," I asked as I led her deeper into the cliffside rooms under the Mansion. "I promise it's a good one."

"With how smug you are being, I feel like I should say no," Glynda retorted. The smile on her face told a different story, small and content as it was.

And why shouldn't she smile?

With Medea and Tsunade keeping an eye on the Faerie Queen and Swamp Thing and no new crisis on the horizon that I was aware of, I could finally dedicate my time to my Family. A moron thinks seduction ends when you're married, but a true man of culture understands that is where the seduction really begins.

In other words, my ego demanded I show the women I married that I was, hands down, the best thing to ever happen to them.

Having seen every aspect of their lives for over a year, I naturally had insight into what an ideal 'date night' looks like to each of them, and I had gone out of my way to ensure I exceeded their wildest dreams.

Glynda, for all her sexual awakening with Scathach, was a romantic at heart.

Our date had started with a picnic in the foothills of the Alps. From there, we meandered our way through a tiny Swiss town hand in hand, seeing the sights, talking to the people, and enjoying each other's company.

Then I teleported us to Florence to enjoy some history, architecture, and more intellectually stimulating conversations before finishing it all with a candlelit dinner in a small hole-in-the-wall restaurant.

It was simple, intimate, and romantic.

Everything Glynda Goodwitch once wished for in a partner before her summoning to

the Island.

Now, as I led her to the final surprise for the evening, I needed to address the woman she had become in a way that showed my acceptance of who she was now.

The content smile on her face turned eager, hungry with lust as I led her down familiar hallways to a familiar door.

“Hardly a surprise,” the huntress chuckled throatily, her voice low and husky with desire. “We end up here a lot.”

“We do,” I agreed with a smirk, turning my smug up to eleven as I opened the door. “But I promised you a surprise, and I intend to deliver.”

Glynda’s eyes widened as she gulped down her saliva.

My sex dungeon was a thing of beauty.

Despite its crude name, it was a room made with comfort and pleasure in mind. Every inch of wall and floor was enchanted with the same cushioning magic as in the Cuddle Pit to make it warm and comfortable. Various tools, toys, or hooks dotted the walls, ready for use. There was a bed, of course, and other furniture for more… exotic positions.

Diana was strapped to a wooden X by her wrists and ankles in the center of the room, drawing the eye of anyone who would enter.

Wonder Woman was a mess. Drool ran from her spread lips around her gag, and her hair was a mess of sweaty strands. Her thighs were just as slick, glistening in the room’s light with proof of her arousal. Ball bearings were clamped to her engorged nipples, and a vibrator, set to its lowest setting, was stuffed inside her cunt, held there by the sinfully tiny thong she wore.

“MMMMMMM!” She screamed into her ball gag, her head lifting to face our direction as we entered. She couldn’t see us, the blindfold prevented it, but she knew we were there. Knew we could see her sorry state.

As we watched, her body shuddered in pleasure.

“What is this?” Glynda asked with wide, hungry eyes. Her tongue unconsciously darted out to lick her lips as she watched Diana’s small orgasm die.

“Your surprise,” I answered smugly. “Her safe word is Eggplant, by the way.”

“How…” Glynda swallowed dryly before continuing. “How long has she been here?”

“About an hour before we left,” I shrugged.

Any regular person would be in severe pain and dehydrated, but Diana was a tough girl. That and I cheated with Sticky Fingers and magic. I had set everything up so she could only feel pleasure, and only just enough of it to experience the most minor and pitiful of orgasms that served to stoke her lusts higher and higher.

“Mmmmfff,” the Amazon moaned pitifully.

Glynda's breathing pace picked up, and her eyes looked at me for the first time since I had opened the door. Her hand raced up, grabbing the back of my head to drag me down into a blazing kiss. The huntress tried to suck my soul out through my mouth for a long moment, pawing and grasping to drag me closer, her hands desperately sliding through my hair in a frenetic hurry.

Just as suddenly as it started, it stopped, and I was yanked backwards by telekinetic force.

"You…" she panted, jade eyes hazy with lust. "Are about to get soo lucky."

Then she rounded on Diana, The Disciplinarian appearing in her hand as she telekinetically shredded her clothes. Below the tasteful blouse and skirt combo had been a set of lacy purple lingerie. Stocking covered her long legs, held up by a garter belt. Her panties were the same colour, though it was hard to tell with how see-through they had become. The purple bra struggled to contain the absolute majesty that was her magnificent breasts.

Her heels clicked on the hard floor as the blonde sauntered towards her prize, pale ass cheeks wobbling back and forth as Glynda added extra sway to her hips for my enjoyment.

I watched it with pleasure, slowly disrobing to give Glynda time to enjoy her surprise. And to appreciate the view.

I had hatched this little plan for a few reasons.

The first and most apparent was: Threesome? Yes, please.

The second and most important reason was giving Glynda something I usually could not.

Most people into BDSM lean more toward the Dom or Sub route by preference but prefer to experience the other side occasionally. Switches are more common than those who are pure masochists or sadists. Most people would try the other side for variety, curiosity, to give their partners a chance, or to reaffirm their control over the situation.

I wasn't one of those people.

The idea of being bound and submissive to someone else's will killed any erection I could ever get. Which was kind of a problem for Glynda because the only other person she had ever been with was Scathach.

Scathach, the one I literally had to beat into submission after she stabbed me. And that still didn't make her any sort of proper 'sub,' even with literal sex magic.

I knew Glynda had been curious about experimenting with the other women of the Island but had held back. As I said, she was a romantic at heart. A romantic pervert.

And so, I had killed three birds with one ball gag.

This little get-together would be an excellent way for Glynda to try out being on the

dominant side, serve as an ice breaker with Diana, the other bisexual BDSM enjoyer, and get me a threesome with two beautiful women.

Win-win-win.

“I had no idea,” Glynda said as she idly toyed with the ball bearing attached to the Amazon’s right nipple.

Crack!

“MMMMMM!” Diana screamed as The Disciplinarian cracked against her breast, sending the titanic tit tumbling. The skin reddened, but the welt disappeared in moments.

“That you were such slut,” Glynda continued without breaking tone as she continued to circle Wonder Woman, inspecting her like a piece of prime meat. Her whip trailed along olive skin, a constant reminder to the blindfolded woman of the teacher’s presence.

“I would have taught you better. Give you some discipline.”

Crack!

This time, the weapon hit the left breast, sending the metal ball attached to an engorged nipple jingling as the massive mammary bounced and wobbled.

“It’s all you naughty little whores need. A firm hand.”

Crack!

Her right ass cheek rippled only once. Diana’s tight ass did not have as much give as her breasts.

“A proper teacher.”

Crack! Left ass cheek.

“Someone who can turn thirsty sluts into decent human beings.”

Crack!

“MMMMMMMMM!”

Ooooh, that was a direct hit on her pubic mound. That had to hurt.

Say what you will about Glynda. She was very good with her weapon.

“But some things cannot be taught, no matter the teacher!”

Crack!

A red mark appeared along the Amazon’s amazing abs before it healed in a second.

“Some students are just!”

Crack!

“Thirsty!”

Crack!

“Bitches!”

Crack!

“MMMMHHHHHMMMM!” Diana screamed her orgasm into her gag, body shuddering

and twitching, hands desperately grasping at the air. Then she sagged in her bonds, exhausted from her release.

“I am going to remove your gag,” Glynda whispered huskily in Wonder Woman’s ear. “If the first words out of your mouth aren’t ‘Thank you, Mistress, can I have some more?’ It will go right back on, and you will not get any dick tonight.” With a flex of telekinetic skill, the gag fell from the Amazonian’s mouth to the floor.

“Thank. You… Mistress…” Diana panted, blue eyes hazy and unfocused. “May I have some more?”

“Hmm. No.”

Not giving the heroine time to respond, Glynda pressed the handle of The Disciplinarian against the pitiful thong that covered Wonder Woman’s pussy. She pushed and pushed, the tip of her whip passing the outer lips as the poor piece of fabric was stretched tighter and tighter, digging deeper into Diana’s ass.

“First, I want to know, what was going through your filthy mind while we were gone?” Glynda leaned forward, nibbling on one of the ravenette’s earlobes as she toyed with the heroine’s cunt. “What were you thinking while you hung here naked? Helpless. A set of holes waiting for the next passerby to take advantage of. What if someone found you? The door was unlocked.”

“Someone, mm, someone did,” Diana answered, and Glynda paused for a second before resuming her probing with renewed force. “Yoruichi found me. Ah. She just, ah, walked in. Saw, mmh, saw me. Didn’t even pause. Mmmmhhhm. Walked right up and stuck her fingers in me. Nngggnnn. Then she left. Said I wasn’t ‘ripe’ yet.”

“Not even the cat in heat wanted you,” Glynda gloated, pulling on a nipple clamp painfully. “How did that make you feel?”

“So good,” Diana whispered pathetically. “Not worth her time. I came.”

“Because you are a desperate, needy slut,” Glynda stepped back, admiring how Diana arched her hips forward, desperate for more stimulation.

Until now, I had watched the show, content to let Glynda have her fun while I lamented the lack of gender equality in the world.

With me, Diana had been a powerbottom. Submissive, but not vulnerable or desperate. Only when I tapped into her corruption fetish did I really get going with her. But the first Dommy Mommy that shoes up turns her into a mewling little sex pet? Completely sexism.

Still hot, though.

But voyeurism wasn’t my fetish, and I had been quiet too long.

“What are you thinking?” I asked casually as I walked up beside the huntress,

grabbing a fistful of bare ass while giving her a chaste peck on the cheek.

“I’m thinking the needy slut has talked enough for now,” Glynda smirked, raising her crop and using her semblance.

“Mistress?” Diana asked, eyes still covered by the blindfold. She could still feel the wooden X she was bound to levitate into the air, flip until she was lying face up. The bound woman floated down till she hovered a little below our hip height. “Mis-?” Diana tried to ask but was cut off as Glynda sat on her face.

“I said you’ve talked too much Slut!” Glynda growled, grinding her mound on the Amazon’s face for a few moments before reaching down and pulling her panties to the side. “Now eat!”

“Mmm, mhhm!” I think that was supposed to be ‘Yes, ma’am!’ but I couldn’t be sure.

“Good girl,” Glynda reached down to pat the top of the Amazon’s head. “Because you are such a good little student, your Master will use you. Not your holes. You still need to earn that. But if he decides he liked your tits enough, maybe he will decide to give you a pity fuck. Only if you do a good job for your Master and Mistress.”

“Mmm, mhhm!”

Knowing an invitation when I heard one, I straddled the center of the floating X-cross, practically sitting on the woman’s spectacular abbs as I laid out my dick between Wonder Woman’s amazing breasts with a quick spell for lubrication.

“Oooh,” Glynda shuddered as I grasped the nipple clamps to pull her breasts tight, trapping my dick in a cavern of warm flesh. “The slut liked that. Pull tighter.”

I did, using more strength than most would handle as I thrust back and forth, the tip of my dick poking out of the tops of her tits.

“That’s it, Slut,” Glynda ground against Diana’s tongue. “Outside, you might be a bigshot hero, but tonight you are just our plaything. You’ve already cum enough. If you want more, you will have to prove you deserve it.”

I grinned, happy to see the huntress having fun. And I didn’t need Sticky Fingers to know Diana was also getting off on it.

Glynda leaned forward, capturing my lips in a hungry kiss once more as we used the world’s greatest heroine for our pleasure.

“How am I doing?” The huntress asked in a whisper as she pulled back from the kiss. Her face was flush, but her makeup, glasses, and hair were still in perfect order.

“You are doing great,” I smiled at her. My preferred method was more of a ramp-up, but diving into the deep end worked too. “She’s loving it.”

“Good, ah, I was worried.”

“Don’t be,” I reassured her. “If there is any problem, I will let you know. Or she will

when it is her turn."

"Her turn?" Glynda gulped, eyes wide in realization.

"You didn't think the teacher couldn't become a student, too, did you?" I asked smugly.

As I said, most people were Switches to one degree or another.

Diana included.

"You are a terrible, wonderful bastard of a man," the former huntress shook her head with an exasperated smile.

"I know."

"I better make the most of the time I have then," Glynda said, grinding her cunt harder on the bound woman's face as she leaned forward to kiss me.

For a long minute, we were content to passionately as we used Themyscria's princess as a sex tool. I didn't know precisely what Diana was doing with her tongue, but judging by the way Glynda huffed, moaned, and shuddered against me, she clearly had more than enough experience eating pussy to drive the teacher wild.

On the other hand, I had to do all the work myself. Wonder Woman's breasts provided a wonderfully tight pressure on my dick as I thrust back and forth, but it was directly proportional to the strength I was using. And I was using a lot. Her tits were nowhere near the most sensitive of the Family, but Diana had to have felt the superhuman pressure as I abused her breasts, their tan skin flushing red as I pulled, pushed, stretched and used them for my pleasure.

I wasn't tit fucking Wonder Woman.

I was masturbating using her breasts.

And she loved it.

This contrasted our time together, where she liked to be part of the experience, wielding her submission as a weapon to bring me pleasure. Adding a second woman to our dynamic gave Diana a sense of familiarity that allowed her to completely let go in a way she couldn't have with just me alone.

"MMMmmhhhhh!" It didn't take long for Glynda to release her first orgasm of the night with a shuddering cry into my mouth. I grunted, signalling my own impending release, ready to paint Diana's chest white.

Glynda had her own plan.

I felt her semblance try to grab hold of me, and I let it.

Even as she shuddered atop Diana's tongue, Glynda levitated me till my dick was levelled with her breasts. Pulling her bra down, the blonde pressed her massive breasts together to trap my dick in a vice of flesh.

“The, umm, slut hasn’t, mmh, earned her Master’s seed, ahh, yet,” she moaned. In a complete reversal of earlier, I did not move as she swayed her tits up and down along my length. “Now paint me! Cover me in cum!”

With such a reasonable request, how could I say no?

I let go, the first rope of thick ejaculate blasting up all the way to her golden hair, covering the left side of her face, glasses and all, in a long lance of cum. I aimed the second blast for her right side, just for the symmetry of it, but it only reached her glasses.

The third and fourth spurts impacted her chin, covering her collarbone in a textbook definition of a pearl necklace. The rest covered her pale breasts in the glistening liquid, spread around as Glynda continued to pump my dick with her massive breasts, seeking to milk even one more drop from my tip.

“That will do, Slut,” Glynda purred as she lowered me to the ground. Righting the X-cross as she stepped off Diana’s face, Glynda took a moment to wipe off her glasses, licking her fingers clean after her vision was clear.

“Did I do good, Mistress?” Diana asked, panting for breath, her chin glistening with leftover signs of Glynda’s arousal.

“That was adequate.”

Damn. If that was she judged a carpet muncher with centuries of experience, I could see why her students thought she was a hardass.

“Thank you, Mistress.”

Glynda waived her crop, removing the Amazon’s blindfold. Another swipe of her hand levitated a dildo and a string of anal beads from a nearby shelf. Neither was small.

“HHHnnnnggggg!” Diana groaned as they were unceremoniously jammed into her lower orifices as her tiny thong was telekinetically torn to shreds.

A final flex of her semblance freed Diana from the cross but bound her hands behind her back.

“Now clean me up,” the teacher ordered as he moved the toys inside the newly freed woman’s holes. “Your Master will jam his fat cock in my ass while you do. If I’m clean before he fills my guts, we’ll both fuck those sluty holes of yours. If you cum…” Glynda trailed off, leaving the threat unsaid.

“Yes, Mistress!” Not that she needed to. Diana eagerly leaned forward, her tongue lapping at the tall woman’s pale breasts as she licked my release from the massive tits.

“Ah, there’s a good slut,” Glynda sighed, drawing Diana’s head tighter to her breasts.

“You ready?” I asked softly as I pressed against her back, kneading her fat ass cheeks. Unlike Diana’s, which were bundles of tight muscles, these had an excellent layer of fat that bounced and wobbled in my hand.

“Put it in,” she said.

“Hmm. No.” I repeated her earlier words to Diana. I was compelled to follow her order, but it was a very specific one, now was it? Her eyes widened as smacked her ass, sending it clapping and rippling as I continued to play with it like dough. “Beg me.”

Seeing Glynda Dom Diana was incredibly hot, don’t get me wrong, but I was still me. I had followed her direction so far because this was her surprise, but I couldn’t have her getting too uppity.

They were both Mine.

“Please?” Glynda asked piteously.

“You can do better,” I admonished, though I stuck a finger in her butt as a reward anyway. While I did, I cast a few spells for cleaning and lubrication. Unsurprisingly, it had been Medea who taught me them.

Those Greeks, man.

“Ah,” she gasped. “Please, Master, please fuck my virgin ass. I’ve been waiting for it all day.”

“Mistress?” Diana licked up Glynda’s neck as she spoke her question.

“Really?” I asked conversationally as I stuck a second finger in her sphincter, my left hand grabbing the back of the Amazon’s head and pressing it back into the huntress’s heaving bosom. Diana got the message and resumed licking. “Why don’t you tell our little slut all about it.”

“It was, nnng, so romantic. You went through all that, hah, effort. Everything, mmnn, I, ah, ever wanted. NNNNGgggg. And all I could think about was, hah, how much I wanted you to fuck my ass! Haaa haaa. My last hole. I was such a thirsty bitch! I wanted you to throw me over the table and claim me in front of everyone there. So please, Master, please fuck my poor, empty ass. Take the last unspoiled part of me for yourself!”

“That was adequate,” I grinned as I withdrew my fingers, grabbed her hips, pulled her cheeks apart and pressed myself into her defenceless ass.

Lacking the prostate gland, most women do not find the actual act of anal sex enjoyable. The ass lacks the nerves of the vagina, the self-lubrication that prevents damage, or the muscular control that kegel muscles can provide.

So why do some women really like anal? Simple.

“You’re such a nasty bitch,” I snarled, teeth-gritting from the tightness of her sphincter as I pressed forward. “You’ve wanted this for years, haven’t you?”

Because it is a perverse act.

“I have,” Glynda admitted with a squeak as I fully bottomed (ha) out in her. Her wonderfully plush cheeks pressed against my pelvis.

A fetish that serves no purpose but sexual gratification.

"How often have you imagined someone bending you over your teacher's desk and taking your ass? Is it your students? Or do they just get to watch their bitch of a professor get sodomized?" I withdrew slowly, hands on her hips, holding her fast as Diana licked her face free of cum.

"NO!" She denied it vehemently, but I felt her muscles contract at the thought.

Wham! I slammed forward, her ass and tits jiggling with the force of the blow.

A taboo.

"Maybe your colleagues? You always complained they were a pain in your ass. I'm sure they wanted to fuck the bitch out of you!" I withdrew slowly once more, teasing her with deliberation.

"As if!"

Wham! I slammed forward again.

Something so wrong that it felt so right.

"Then who? Who did that dirty mind think of while you masturbated yourself stupid?" Though her hips tried to push back, to keep me inside her tight asshole, I was strong enough to keep her in place.

"No one!" Wham! "Urk. There was no one! No one man enough to do to me what you do!" Wham! "No one to." Wham! "Fuck." Wham! "My." Wham! "Ass!"

With my fragile male ego appropriately soothed (though I knew it had more to do with the absolute shitshow that was Remanant than any trait of mine), I really cut loose.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

"aaaaeeeEEEEIIII!" Glynda's low moan rose in volume and octave as I fucked her ass harder and harder. Most of the cum had already been cleaned from her, so Diana just latched onto a bouncing nipple, riding out Glynda's orgasm as best she could.

I had other plans.

"You were respectable once upon a time," I growled in her ear. "Now look at you. You have a cock up your ass while a pet slut eats cum off you. If any of your former friends saw you, would they recognize you? They wouldn't. All they'd see is a horny sow. A lowly, filthy, disgusting, horny bitch!"

"MMMMMNNNNNNNNN!"

Wham! Wham! Wham!

I kept pounding as Diana squirted over the toys, still moving in and out of her.

My words, directed at Glynda, were targeted directly at the Amazon's corruption fetish.

She had failed the huntress' little test.

I grinned as I came in Glynda's tight ass, pressing as deeply as possible. Now she had an excuse to punish the heroine.

"Uuuuhhh," Glynda moaned pitifully, slumped against me as she shuddered.

As soon as she was conscious, that is.

Author's Note:

Fair warning, this one is pure smut. I wanted to see if I could give up my foreshadowing addiction for at least one chapter.

Due to my impending travels, this is a shorter update (the size of my early chapters is now 'short,' FML)

Next week I'll be releasing a few omakes then I'll be gone until June 2nd.

I'll see you all then.

Tribunal

TRIBUNAL I

How can anybody live in a world that's so cruel and beautiful?
Always asking why we're really here
Losing all of our control to our fears
Some of us are strong, some of us are weak, but still we seek…
For a new day that can offer more
Do we really know the world we're fighting for?

"Welcome to Themyscria," Hippolyta greeted us in a flowing toga as Wonder Woman led us down from the League plane.

Apparently, it was impolite to teleport everywhere.

Who knew?

"I'm home, Mother," Wonder Woman said as she stepped forward and pulled her mother into a hug, getting some warm smiles from the two amazons acting as ceremonial guards beside the Queen.

I recognized them both from Diana's Semblance, though I couldn't put faces to names. Though they smiled at the heroine, they returned their focus to the four of us and kept a firm grip on their spears.

As I said, ceremonial.

The Queen returned the gesture affectionately, embracing her daughter tightly, but her eyes never left our group.

Diana watched on, a complex whirl of emotions held tight by her self-control. Still, I saw the way her hands twitched, the half-step she took when Hippolyta opened her arms, and the look of recognition in her eyes as she saw the guards.

Artoria sensed her friend's inner conflict and placed a reassuring hand on the heroine's shoulder in solidarity.

None of us were children, but we could all sympathize with the desire to embrace friends and family lost to us. Even if they weren't identical versions of the people we knew.

When we had first landed on Earth, I had searched to see if there was an equivalent of myself and my loved ones here. I don't know what I would have done if I had found anyone I was familiar with, but I had been lucky, in a way, to find almost every different than my home version of Earth.

Diana was a different kind of lucky.

Unlike Emma, who almost despised her past, Diana had done everything she could to

recapture what she once held. She returned to hero work, rejoined the League, spent time with her old friends, and even fought some of her old rogue's gallery. The only thing missing to make this world a second home for her was the acceptance and love from her mother and sisters, both biological and social.

Diana's Semblance, the manifestation of her soul, was summoning that same family to fight beside her, so I could only imagine what emotions were warring inside her right now. Thankfully she had Artoria to help her right now.

Robin and I, we were concerned about more physical dangers.

Even before we had landed, I am sure the former Strawhat Pirate had seeded eyes and ears all over the island. She would alert me to anything of note, whether it was some juicy secrets or an army of angry amazons gathering to play 'pin the sword in the dragon.'

Her ability to create tiny lips to talk through in our ears was an incredible boon for Op-sec. Combined with my illusions and nobody would know.

Originally, Ranni was supposed to come too, but she had decided to stay back. Both to avoid stepping on divine toes and prepare for the Charity Gala later tonight. So it was just the three of them and me, and I kept my eyes locked on our 'Welcome Party'.

Hippolyta took it all in, Diana's movements, Artoria's response and Robin's wariness with the cunning of a woman who had led her people since before the Trojan War over three thousand years ago. A woman who could be a Heroic Spirit without any extra comic bullshit. This world's first Wonder Woman, who had fought in both world wars alongside the original Justice Society of America.

Depending on the media, era, or timeline, the amazons of Themyscria varied. They ranged from traumatized serial rape victims hiding from the world after it hurt them all the way to a militaristic, misandrist society wishing for the erasure of all men. Their powers also varied depending on the depiction. They could be as weak as mortal, if well-trained, women to being able to rival Kryptonians.

Their attitude, as well as their powers, would determine how well things would play out from here.

It didn't matter if I was on my best behaviour if this was a trap of some sort.

Thankfully, I was in luck.

I didn't feel any animosity in her gaze.

I had no empathetic powers like Raven, but I did have my experiences, Social Talent, and more smarts than the average bear. After centuries of living every day surrounded by legions of enemies waiting in the wings to feed me my entrails told me that this woman was dangerous but not hostile.

Wary, but not malevolent.

I gave it a day before I pissed her off enough to want me dead.

Which is why I was only staying a few hours.

Not only did I have that Gala later, where I'd meet up with Emma, but after I had to interrogate Priscilla's newest Spirit Ashes. It was going to be a long day as it was. No need to antagonize people just yet when I could do it later.

I was going to be on my best behaviour, as promised, but I knew myself well enough to know this island wasn't for me, no matter how beautiful the warm weather of the Mediterranean was.

There are certain places or cultures that one only wants to visit once and then leave. Places to do the tourist thing, see the sights, learn the history, and maybe talk to a few people before getting the fuck out.

Themyscria was a beautiful hell for me.

But I was on my best behaviour, so I didn't say that.

At least not yet.

We'd see how this went.

"Greetings, Elden Lord," Hippolyta nodded at me in acknowledgement. Not deferential in the slightest.

She looked like her daughter. Slightly shorter and with darker eyes, but she had the same dark hair and solid features and held herself with the same easy confidence that I found so appealing in Diana.

But there was a wisdom in her eyes, one I saw in my wife but was lacking in this world's Wonder Woman. The understanding that years brought with them. Of innumerable battles and tragedies and the internal strength gained from overcoming them.

That wisdom was turned on us.

She recognized how we had subconsciously positioned ourselves, Artoria and Diana to my left and Robin to my right, and judged that the other three would follow my lead. She also didn't call me by my name, just my title. This wasn't a greeting to a 'son-in-law' but a 'fellow leader'.

"You are among the few males to have ever set foot upon our home," Hippolyta continued. It lacked the warmth present when talking to her daughter. Polite is what it was. Measured. "It is a high honour. Most who fall upon our shores do not survive the experience."

Translation: We're not going to try and kill you. For now. But that can change.

Politics.

But what for? Just a test, or was there some deeper meaning?

Still, two could play this game.

“Thank you for having us, Queen of the Amazons,” I nodded back with a smile. Friendly, but not warm. “Your home is lovely, and I thank you for the invitation to visit. Diana has sung its praises so well that I have had the strongest urge to visit. Other concerns have, unfortunately, kept me occupied.”

Translation: I’ll be good, but I can come and go as I please, and you can’t do anything to stop me. I am playing nice for my wife. Don’t push it.

“That is unfortunate, as I have heard some curious tales about your family. Still, I am hearted that one of ours still calls Themyscria home, even if I wish I had been there when she visited the first time.”

Translation: I know you can. You already did. Your wives invaded my home without my permission.

Even as Artoria and Diana winced, my smile deepened.

She was good.

“We apologize for the confusion we may have caused,” I lowered my head slightly. The guards beside the Queen tightened their hold on their spears. “We sometimes forget that others are not as well travelled as us. It is as you said. Unfortunate. Even if this is but one of infinite versions of Themyscria, the call of home is loud. We had no peaceful way of reaching out that wouldn’t further exacerbate the issue as communication channels are limited.”

Translation: Sorry, not sorry. It’s your fault for not understanding multidimensional parallels and thinking my wife was your daughter. And if you didn’t isolate yourselves, we could have cleared it up earlier. Also, you are utterly replaceable to me. So nyeh~.

“I can’t imagine many are as well-travelled as you,” Hippolyta answered lightly. “Still, all women can find sanctuary from the cruelties of men in Themyscria. I would just ask for no more unannounced visits. Please pass any messages through official channels if any of your family wish to visit.”

Translation: That is not a valid excuse, but I’ll let it slide for the moment but will bring it up when it is convenient to me. Also, when the women in your family want to ditch you, we’ll welcome them with open arms. Nyeh~.

“I see no reason not to agree to such a reasonable request, so long as those channels are open,” I ‘agreed’. “I understand how…limiting it can be to have such a small embassy, so I hope you can forgive us if any communication is delayed again.”

Translation: I am not an insecure husband. I have complete trust in my relationships with my Family, so much I don’t even need to address that point. Also, you only have Wonder Woman as an ambassador. Without her, you have no official channels. So it’s your fault anyway. Nyeh nyeh~.

“I am glad you can sympathize. Sometimes my daughter is indisposed by her duties protecting the world from threats. As I understand it, you also live on an island, much like ours. Have you considered diplomatic envoys of your own? Having qualified people to rely on has lessened my worries considerably. If you do, I am sure such misunderstandings will be lessened.”

Translation: I know you don’t have anyone but your family on your side, and there aren’t enough of you to match us. You are a ruler of land but not people. Also, I know you’re why Wonder Woman was ‘indisposed’. That too, I will bring up later when convenient. Nyeh nyeh nyeh~.

“I admit, I am jealous you can count on so many people. Still, wanderers that we are, we don’t have any plans for such an institution. It is better that way. A smaller, more intimate group travels easier. Less risk of factions forming. We might not have the… diversity of talent you call upon, but I believe we make up for it with communication, individual ability, and cohesion. I have apologized to your daughter and am willing to fix the issue at any moment. It was never my intent to be a source of distress for the heroes of the world.”

Translation: We have fewer people, but we are better than you as a whole. I also know about your internal divisions. Don’t push, and I won’t. Look at what happened to the last time people ‘misunderstood’ me. Also, I can solve the ‘Insight Issue’ at any point. Again, your fault. Nyeh to the fourth power~.

Hippolyta opened her mouth to reply, probably something to the effect of ‘Nyeh x5’, but she was interrupted by her daughter speaking up.

“There is nothing to fix. I have it under control, though I appreciate the sentiment,” Wonder Woman said, eyes darting back and forth between me and her mother as she spoke.

Something about her actions sparked some giggles from Robin, and Artoria smiled slightly.

Diana looked as confused as me.

All the women with me were familiar with politicking and its language, even if they didn’t enjoy it. They had been able to follow the back and forth easily enough to know that, though I was the one apologizing, I was ‘winning’ the verbal bout. But it was in no way a sure thing. There was a genuine possibility that she could negotiate me into a more perilous position.

Hippolyta, as I said, was good.

Really good.

Though we were speaking politely, flattering each other, and employing every nicety

one would expect from people of our 'station,' a battle was waged with every one of our words. A battle Hippolyta was fighting magnificently. For every one of my barbs, she had one of her own.

The repartee between us was damned impressive when you consider that she was a queen of a nation of isolationists who hadn't left her island in seventy years. Her words flowed smoothly, showing a level of awareness about the outside world that had caught me a bit flat-footed.

I also had yet to learn what her endgame was. What did she want with me? Why had she 'summoned' Diana and me? What was her goal in these 'negotiations?'

Without knowing that, I had no confidence in keeping her on the back foot.

If things had kept going, I had no guarantee I would 'win,' which was why I was enjoying myself before Wonder Woman ruined my fun.

By interrupting her mother, she had 'conceded' the match, meaning if Hippolyta tried to bring up the same points again, she risked being seen as petty or incompetent.

Probably not a significant risk for the Amazonian Queen, her rule was pretty established, but the loss of pride would mean the Greek woman would hold herself to her 'loss'. In politics, reality came second to perception.

By the way Hippolyta's eyes flitted to her daughter and narrowed slightly, I could see that she, too, understood the situation.

But, and I cannot repeat this enough, Hippolyta was good, so the shift didn't stop her for more than a moment.

"That is good to hear. You know I worry about you." Wonder Woman winced at the gentle rebuke that suggested she was less able than her mother. Still, the heroine did not look regretful as she continued to watch Hippolyta and me like a hawk. "I have been remiss in my duties as hostess, however. As I said, you are all welcome here, and I hope you will enjoy your time on Themyscria."

With the fluidity of an experienced politician, Hippolyta smoothly turned from talking to me to addressing us each in turn. Her tone was warm, warmer than when speaking to me at least, and welcoming but not intimate. She was greeting guests, not friends.

"Nico Robin, my daughter has told me about your interest in our history and Atlantis. Our chronicler is more than happy to speak with you if you so wish?"

"It would be much appreciated, your Majesty," Robin smiled at the Queen.

"Wonderful. We are always happy to share our culture with those interested. Artemis will show you the way to our archives."

Without another word, the guardswoman on her right saluted the Queen and turned on her heel to lead Robin away. The pirate sent me a look but turned to follow anyway.

“And you must be Artoria,” Hippolyta smiled warmly at the blonde, greeting her by name, not title. “I admit, I am a bit star-struck. Even here, on our small island, have we heard of your accomplishments. Or at least our King Arthur. Your tales of chivalry give us hope for man’s world. My daughter tells me you live up to your fame and more.”

“You flatter me, Hippolyta,” Artoria also responded without titles but with a nod of respect. “My kingdom has long faded while yours still stands even after all these years. It is a testament to your sage rule. I count your daughter as a friend and Diana as a sister. Both have nothing but praise for you.”

“I am sure we have stories to share over your time here,” the Queen said lightly with a slight chuckle. I would bet my left kidney that she caught the subtle warning in Artoria’s words. A sage ruler doesn’t make needless enemies. “Before that, I wonder if you can indulge a small, selfish request of mine?” Artoria said nothing but tilted her head to show she was listening. “You remember Phoebe?” She gestured to the remaining guard on her left.

“I do,” the King of Knights nodded to the woman in greeting.

“She, and the others you met weeks ago, have not stopped bragging about their encounter with you and Scathach. Once she heard you were returning, she practically begged me for permission to a rematch with you. Would it trouble you to indulge her request for a spar?”

There was a brief pause as the blonde looked at the Queen, then to the guardswoman, whose expression hadn’t changed the entire time. Then Artoria looked at Diana and me before slowly nodding her head.

“It is no trouble at all.”

As the last guard led Artoria away, Hippolyta turned to Diana.

For the first time since we had landed, I saw the Amazonian Queen hesitate.

Like Diana, I imagine she was feeling a conflicting mix of emotions.

This was her daughter, but she also wasn’t. A woman older and more mature than the one standing beside her but having the same face and enough similarities in experiences to claim to be the same person.

The uncanny valley alone was something I did not envy.

But both were strong women, and the hesitation lasted only a moment.

“Daughter,” Hippolyta spoke, turning away from Diana to look at Wonder Woman. My wife wilted slightly but held firm at the perceived rejection. “You’ve been away from the island. Please perform the necessary absolutions and purifications before our meal. I know you returned recently, but it is necessary for every Amazon who leaves and returns from Man’s World.” There was only a brief pause before she continued. “Guide Diana as

well. There might be differences between dimensions."

"Of course, Mother," Wonder Woman gave my wife a smile of encouragement. Diana had perked up noticeably at Hippolyta's roundabout way of acknowledging their relationship.

It was not a hug, but it was a 'welcome home' in its own way.

"Thank you, Queen Hippolyta," Diana bowed slightly at the olive branch extended.

I was sure it wasn't what she had hoped for, but it was the first step.

"No thanks are needed," the Queen of the Amazons said lightly, looking at Diana and then at my gentle smile and back. "So long as they abide by its spirit, Themyscria will always welcome its daughters home, no matter how far they wander from its shores."

My grin widened as Diana straightened up and nodded solemnly at the welcome and the warning in that statement.

Wonder Woman turned to lead my wife away but paused, eyes darting between me and her mother once more.

"Are you certain I should not accompany you, mother?"

"I am more than capable of handling myself in this situation," the Queen chuckled lightly again.

Her words were light, but the slight glare she sent her daughter's way ensured no further disagreement with her will.

Wonder Woman continued to look between us, clearly worried about something, but she held her tongue and turned to lead Diana away.

Not before my wife sent me a glare that said: 'Behave.'

I don't know what she was so worried about. I was on my best behaviour.

As the pair of women disappeared into one of the temples of Themyscria, I turned to the Queen of the Amazons.

"So, now that you've non-too-subtly isolated us all, are you going have your wicked way with my poor, virginal body?"

See, best behaviour.

******

This man, this Elden Lord, was Dangerous.

Dangerous in a way few men ever were.

Her daughter had warned her of his terrible sense of humour, awful fashion sense, and habit of poking and prodding those around him.

The floral print shirt, the crass joke, and how he had subtly taunted her during their

verbal bout corroborated Diana's words, but she had not been prepared for the sense of threat she felt after only spending five minutes in his presence.

Perhaps her daughter was simply too naive, too new to the world, despite her age, to understand what sort of monster hid behind that crooked grin.

Hippolyta had seen Kings. Heroes. Gods. Whether in the times of ancient Greece or in the decades fighting in the twentieth century, the Amazon had seen and fought against men of power.

Hippolyta was not discounting the threat women could pose to her people and the world as a whole. Even to this day, Circe continued to be one of her most stalwart foes. But women rarely had enough political, monetary, military, or magical power to pose a threat.

It was a sad but absolute truth that women were subordinate to men for most of history.

Before the modern age, Hippolyta could count on two hands the number of mortal women who could pose a threat to her people and still have fingers left over. The last century or so had seen that situation change, but Hippolyta ruled for millennia over a people most of the male-dominated world would love to see despoiled and enslaved.

For every Red Sonja, Scathact, or Shi Yang, there were thousands of Alexander the Greats, Qin Shi Huang, or Columbus.

The Elden Lord was none of those men.

Despite Hippolyta's worst fears when her daughter had told her of a man of power married to twelve women, it was clear after only a few minutes in his company that he was no Saladin, Agamemnon, or Ghengis Khan.

He cared about the women with him, and they returned that affection. They might be controlled, but his affection for them was genuine. Hippolyta had seen men that used despicable means to achieve love, and the ritualistic absolutions the other version of her daughter was going through would remove such magical control.

But she had very rarely seen love like that from the type of men who would use such means.

The way he communicated with them without words.

The subtle touching of reassurance as they separated.

The warm smiles, the looks of concern, the trust in each other.

They all spoke of a healthy, loving relationship so rarely found but dearly sought out.

Which made the Elden Lord Dangerous.

There were three types of people Hippolyta considered a threat.

Madmen, for you never know what they might do.

A man of cunning, for their lack of power only heightens their threat.

And a man in love, for a man in love will walk into Hades with a smile.

Hippolyta had known the Elden Lord was the first kind of being, thanks to her daughter's 'insight' into his existence.

The little test upon his first arrival had proven he did not lack cunning and wit, despite his power.

And he was deeply in love with his wives.

Hippolyta had learned all that in less than five minutes in the man's presence.

She might not have the raw intellect of Bruce Wayne, Tony Stark, or Reed Richards, but her experience and lack of ego made the difference. She saw deeper than anyone else.

At that moment, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, understood Mikael more than anyone on the planet but his family.

Robin's joke about Mikael accidentally seducing Wonder Woman's mother was closer to home than she could have ever expected. In many ways, both were incredibly compatible with the other. But the heroine had no reason to worry about a torrid romance between the pair.

Hippolyta's heightened understanding of the Elden Lord did not attract him to her.

It terrified her.

At that moment, when she realized what kind of monster she was dealing with, Hippolyta wished nothing more for the Elden Lord to leave her island, planet, and dimension.

Preferably leaving them intact.

But none of that showed on her face.

Instead, when the monster in a shape of a man tried to get her to lower her guard and underestimate him, she continued without breaking stride as she led him along a path that wound around a small peninsula of Themyscria, far from any interruptions or fragile things.

Like her city.

"I doubt anything about you is virginal," Hippolyta joked lightly, unwilling to let his words disrupt her.

"My feet," the Elden Lord responded incredibly seriously. "I'm not into foot stuff. Complete turnoff for me."

Despite her reaffirming her dedication to not underestimating the being walking beside her not even seconds ago, Hippolyta could not help the slight stumble in her step at the absurdity of his words.

"Of course, I don't judge if you are into that," he continued, his stern look fading to a

slight smile.

Hippolyta inwardly cursed, realizing he had still managed to get her despite her wariness. And after less than thirty seconds. If her probing with politics had been her test for him, then this had been his test for her. One she had failed in the first round.

But it gave her another insight into his character.

He wasn't the type to rise to his foe's level but brought them down to his. And he entirely lacked any sense of shame.

"I would ask that you keep such jokes to yourself while on Themyscria," Hippolyta conceded the round to the victor. "My sisters are not as… inured as I am to the humour of man's world. Many will negatively react to a man bringing up such subjects."

"Sure," the man agreed easily. Too easily. Hippolyta's surprise must have shown on her face because he chuckled and explained. "I have a terrible sense of humour. I know that. I like dark jokes and gallows humour. I have always believed that you must laugh at the worst the world has to offer because it's either that or cry about it."

"That is one way to look at it," the Amazon conceded politically, which got another chuckle.

"It's not for everyone, but it is for me," he shrugged philosophically. "Still, there are some things I don't do. Don't make a dead-baby joke to someone who has lost a child. Don't joke about suicide to the suicidal. Don't joke about death to those who are about to die and fear it."

The Elden Lord paused and gave Hippolyta a look filled with compassion and sympathy, and she got the rest of his message.

Don't joke about sex to rape victims.

"Having rules like that goes a long way to not alienating potential allies and making friends," Mikael continued.

But to his enemies, everything was fair game was the unsaid message.

Hippolyta allowed herself to smile and nod in agreement.

The Elden Lord was still Dangerous, but he wasn't completely mad. So long as they did not cross his bottom line, they could trust his love for his wives and his limited morality. But he was undoubtedly cunning. Hippolyta didn't doubt for an instant that he had chosen such a topic to see how she would react to it.

The pair walked in silence for a few minutes, Mikael taking in the emerald waters of the Mediterranean Sea, the picture-perfect weather, and the Greek architecture of her home.

Hippolyta was content to let him do so.

She hadn't been lying when she told him it was rare for someone to visit her home.

She would be denying the truth if she didn't admit to a surge of pride that filled her as she watched him survey her home.

It wasn't him in particular that was the cause, but just the sense of fulfilment that came when one got to brag about a project to someone who understood the effort it took to complete.

Hippolyta had fought and bled for Themyscria for thousands of years and was proud of what her people had achieved here.

"Your home is as beautiful as it is peaceful," Mikael eventually said as they stopped at the eastern edge of the small peninsula, the paved path winding along a cliff top to look out at the sea.

"Thank you," Hippolyta accepted the praise graciously, despite something in the way he spoke that hinted at a hidden meaning in his words. "Is your home similar?"

"My Island is much larger, no less beautiful, but in no way is it peaceful," he answered with a lopsided grin.

"I can't imagine there is much that can pose a threat to you?"

"There isn't, but it is a difference in preference. When I look at your home, I see order. Beauty in symmetry. The triumph of civilization over the wild. My home is chaotic, deadly for all but a handful of beings, and completely untamed except for where I live. To your people, it would be hell on Earth, but I would choose to spend eternity there rather than here."

"Because it is your home," Hippolyta nodded as they continued along the path.

"No. Because it changes. Monsters slaughter each other in the thousands daily as their areas of control vacillate. One day the drakes will hunt a hydra, and the next, they will be eaten by another. Biomes expand and contract in an ever-shifting clash of nature as they but against each other."

"It's a mess," Hippolyta subtly criticized without offering a real opinion one way or the other. If he wanted to keep talking, she would let him. The more she learned about Mikael, the better.

"A glorious mess," he grinned. "I spend hours every day flying over my home, never knowing what I will see."

"I can see the appeal," the Amazon said lightly. "But I prefer peace to change."

"There is nothing wrong with that," Mikael shrugged for the third time. "Just a difference in preferences. Contrary to what some might say, there is no better or worse civilization or way of life. There is just what we, as people, can accept and what we cannot. I accept the risk of an open sky, where danger lurks below and above. You accept the bird cage, gilded and safe. Neither is wrong."

“Themyscria is no cage, as you are well aware. I have left and returned, as has my daughter and many of my sisters,” the Queen responded, not letting the words offend her but denying their core.

“Just because the owners can open the door to the cage does not make the bird any freer when they can close it as well,” Mikael responded readily. “And have they not done so to some of your sisters? Those who refuse to follow the house rules will invariably fly away, forbidden to return. Those who remain will be the ones who come when called. Who sing when told to sing. Who lure in other birds at their master’s command.”

The conversation had been light so far. Aery words were exchanged in light tones as if talking about the weather or reminiscing over a cup of coffee. Even the Elden Lord’s last statement had continued in the same friendly tone.

Hippolyta froze mid-step.

The Elden Lord kept walking, not speeding up or slowing down.

To her credit, the Queen of the Amazons regained her stride in an eyeblink.

“And yet the bird flew in, knowing the door might close on them.”

“No cage can hold me,” the Elden Lord laughed.

“Many men have thought so, only to be proven wrong,” Hippolyta cautioned. The dragon didn’t say anything, just smiling at her before returning to his sightseeing. “How did you know?”

“Process of elimination,” the monster shrugged. “You asked for Diana and me, not Artoria or Scathach, so it wasn’t about their little visit. I figured it was some sort of ambush to free her from whatever dastardly mind control I must have on her. Once separated, you can use your magic to cleanse any controls on her and then pile up on me and whoever came with me individually. Kudos on the whole purification nonsense. Very well done.”

“There really are rituals to observe whenever one of us returns home,” Hippolyta denied. “They were quite an annoyance when I spent time in Man’s World.”

“Fair enough,” he conceded. “But I don’t think I am wrong about anything else. Only one point didn’t make sense to me before I arrived. Why summon me at all?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why not have Diana come alone or with only women who might also be under my control? It wouldn’t be suspicious. You guys aren’t known for welcoming men. From there, you would not only have more fighters on your side, but I would have less on mine. If you were subtle about it, I might not have suspected anything until everyone was freed from my dastardly, and totally not fictitious, control.”

“You said it didn’t make any sense before you arrived. Do you have an idea now?”

Keep him talking, Hippolyta. Just keep him talking.

"It was really obvious, now that I think about it," he chuckled. "Despite the armed guards with you, no one else on this island is prepared for battle, not even you. Which means I was completely wrong, and I owe you an apology or…"

"Or?" Hippolyta felt a pit form in her stomach.

"Or it is not the amazons I would be fighting in your ambush," the monster disguised as a man shrugged. "Again, it should have been obvious to me, looking back. I am a bit above your weight class. I got the last clue I needed while we were walking. On that note, can you get your gods to stop trying to teleport me away? It won't work without my permission and gets annoying after the first dozen attempts."

"I am afraid I can't do that," Hippolyta answered firmly.

For the first time in their walk, the Elden Lord stopped his meandering gait and turned to face her full-on, draconic eyes staring down at her as he quirked an eyebrow and gave another crooked smile.

"Oh?"

The sun seemed to dim, and the waves quieted in her ears.

Hippolyta felt fear bubble up. Fear for herself, her people, and the island they stood upon.

But she was familiar with fear and would not bow before it.

Hippolyta kept walking, not speeding up or slowing down.

"I can't," she repeated, her voice as steady as before. "It is not up to me to dictate to the gods."

"And thus, the caged bird sings only when told."

Despite his mocking words, the Elden Lord's voice was light again as he casually caught up to her, his face set in an amused grin.

Hippolyta didn't let any of the relief she felt show.

"Call us what you will, but I will not jeopardize my people for your comfort. Nor do I have any way of reaching them from here."

"I guess I'll just have to wait for them to get bored," he shrugged. "I imagine they've only tried so many times because they can't see what's happening here without me allowing it."

"You are taking this very well," the Amazon noted. "Most men would have lashed out, run away, or done anything else but speak calmly when they realized they walked into a trap."

"Most men are not as awesome as me," Mikael bragged, pretending to buff his nails on his shirt. "I'm so badass, I can walk into a trap set by gods and swag my way out."

Hippolyta gave him a doubtful look until he relented, rolling his eyes.

“I am not doing anything for three reasons,” he explained. “The first is that I care about my wife and any potential relationship she might have with Themyscria. You might not be her mom, and these might not be her sisters, but that doesn’t change the fact that she is trying to build something here. If I go Godzilla on you all, I can’t imagine it will go over well for either side. Unless you give me a reason, I’ll be sleeping on the couch for a week. Metaphorically.”

“I do not know what ‘Godzilla’ means, but I can appreciate your care,” Hippolyta nodded, a bit ashamed. But not enough to regret the actions she had taken.

“I swear, you need to get internet here,” Mikael sighed in exasperation. “Anyway, the second reason is that, as far as traps go, this one is pretty shitty. Neither I nor mine have been harmed in any way. We’re not hurt, not even inconvenienced, so we won’t hurt you. Your entire premise was built on false information. The assumption that my wives were being controlled. That I could be teleported away without my permission. That I wouldn’t recognize what was going on. It is ignorance, not lack of skills, that kills people.”

“You are not wrong,” the Amazon allowed herself to sigh. How many more things was this man hiding?

“If I ever get the chance, remind me to tell you about Patches. Now there was a man who knew how to set a trap,” Mikael said fondly. “For your information, I didn’t kill him either. He was too useful to me, and I eventually counted him as a friend. It’s the same principle. If I killed everyone who tried to screw me over at one point, nobody would be alive. Not even me. God knows past me screwed me over a bunch of times.”

“What is the third reason?”

“You.” Mikael stopped once more, eyes meeting hers again. This time Hippolyta stopped as well and looked up at him. “I like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you separated us, I let the others know that what we would do would depend on you,” he said, not explaining how he communicated with them. “A possible relationship and a badly laid trap are not a good foundation to build trust upon. For all I know, you can take advantage of Diana once I leave to set a much more nefarious trap. So I needed to make a judgment call. I decided to leave it up to you. If you lashed out when confronted, I would too. Even if I did not burn this island to dust, I would have left my mark.”

“But I didn’t.”

“You didn’t,” he agreed his grin in full force. “In worlds like this, many people think with their fists first. They impose their morality, their beliefs, and their laws upon others. My Island is hell to you. Yours is hell to me. You disapprove of my relationships. I think

you are a pet on a leash to the gods. You planned to kill me. I planned to devastate you. But, and this is the key, neither of us did. We talked. We joked. We are not friends, and we do not trust each other. But we understand each other. What the other values, and what cannot be touched."

"You are expecting a lot from a half an hour's walk."

"Am I?" Mikael grinned smugly. "Then let me ask you, before today, did you think it was a good idea to set up this ambush?"

"As I said, it is not up to me to dictate to the gods," Hippolyta tried to deflect, but the man was having none of it.

"The pet may be loyal, but it can have its own opinions," he pressed.

"From everything I have heard of you," Hippolyta sighed, seeing he would not let this go. "I did believe that bringing you in front of the gods was a good idea. I will clarify that, as far as I am aware, they only wish to speak with you and ask questions. The Blinding, as well as your arrival, have stirred the divine waters. I was given explicit orders not to antagonize you."

"And now?" Mikael's grin was sharklike. "Do you still think this was a good idea?"

"Meeting you face to face was absolutely necessary, as is ensuring that you are not enslaving the women you claim to love," the woman glared up at him, but his smile did not relent. "But, I see now placing you in the same room as Lord Zeus and the Olympians would be a catastrophe."

"See, you do get me," Mikael said with a chuckle, resuming his walk. "I will clarify that if they had approached me openly, I would be willing to talk. Just like we are doing now. Maybe sit down with a few beers. I don't hate gods. They are just people to me. Slightly stronger and with bigger egos, but just people. I could even see myself being friends with a few of the Olympians. But, that ship sailed when the god of hospitality violated his sacred charge."

Hippolyta grimaced openly this time, well aware of the enormous breach in social etiquette that was welcoming someone into your home only to for it to be a trap.

If the other pantheons ever learned of this, the Greeks would be a laughingstock for centuries.

"If, after learning I wasn't following their script, the gods descended in a tide of lightning and violence, or you tried to rally your sisters to attack me, I would have had to respond in kind. Just as I would have done if the offer of hospitality had been made in good faith. My Family and I all knew the risks when we came here. We left it up to you."

"And I passed your little test," Hippolyta couldn't help the bite in her words.

"Just as I did yours," he reminded her. "Do not think I belittle you. Your choices, not

your gods', saved this island and your people. Not bad for a bird in a cage."

"You speak as if your victory is certain in a conflict."

"When one side is immortal and cannot be held imprisoned, their victory is not a question of if, but when."

Hippolyta couldn't disagree with that, even if she didn't believe he was truly as immortal as he claimed. She had met hundreds who had asserted the same, only to fall in some manner to the mortals they looked down upon.

"I meant it literally when I said I would bet on you," Mikael explained after a beat of silence, diverting the topic. "Medea and I had a wager, you see. About what would happen when I walked into this trap. She thought the gods she despised, and those who served them, would be the same as she remembered. I disagreed. So far, the people of this world have pleasantly surprised me. I keep having these expectations, mostly negative, and you all keep proving yourselves much better than the two-dimensional characters I imagine in my head. I bet you would surprise me as well."

"And what was this wager," she asked, morbidly curious.

"Loser had to wear a naked apron for a day," Mikael grinned lasciviously. "I felt safe taking the bet. I win either way."

For the first time since meeting him, Hippolyta felt the expected reaction to a man landing on her shores.

"Ugh. Men."

Mikael's laughter boomed across the island, and the rest of their walk was spent on lighter topics.

******

"It feels almost like home," Diana said softly as she lounged on a terrace overlooking Themyscria. Freshly bathed, in a new toga, and lightly dining on some fruit, the woman felt more relaxed, more whole than she had in years.

"It is home," Wonder Woman insisted, taking a sip of wine as she lounged in a nearby seat.

"It isn't," Diana denied with a smile. "But it feels like it. And that is enough."

"Give mother time. She will come to know you as I have."

"That is not it," Diana shook her head but didn't explain more as Artoria came to join them.

She, too, must have bathed and had her hair done. The heroine inwardly swore to get the blonde to wear her native clothes more often. Artoria in a toga was not something

Diana knew she needed in her life until now but damned if she was going to live without it.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” She asked as the King of Knights took a seat and helped herself to some dates.

“Very much so,” Artoria nodded at Wonder Woman. “Though lacking your strength and speed, your fellow Amazons acquitted themselves very well. Your sister shows promise, even if she is too eager and inexperienced.”

“I’ve been thinking of having Donna spend some time with one of the younger PRT teams to allow her to gain experience,” Wonder Woman admitted. “I know she is eager to leave the island and see the world, but I have hesitated to bring it up as I do not want to instil false hope. My mother has the ultimate say on the comings and goings of our people.”

“Who were you thinking of?” Diana asked her counterpart.

“I had been debating between the Teen Titans or Young Avengers before the Trigon disaster. It would not be wise to burden the former with a new teammate so soon after their ordeal.”

“I would not discount those six,” Artoria counselled. “Not only are they strong men and women, but Glynda tells me they are recovering well. And if you did decide to reach out to them, and they accepted, she would be getting instructions from one of the greatest combat instructors I have seen. And Raven keeps a close eye on that group, so she would be safe while remaining independent.”

“I will give it some more thought,” Wonder Woman accepted. “I am in no rush and have not even brought up the subject to my mother yet.”

“What subject?” Hippolyta asked as she joined the trio.

“We were discussing your other daughter’s performance in the arena,” Artoria said as all three stood at the Queen’s arrival. “She performed well, despite her youth. You must be proud.”

“I am. Of both my daughters.”

Wonder Woman smiled at her mother, and they all returned to their seats except Diana, who looked at the Queen with a furrowed brow.

“Pardon the question, Queen Hippolyta, but where is my husband?”

“We split ways when I was called away by a message from the Oracle some forty minutes ago.”

“Anything to be concerned of?” Wonder Woman asked her mother, understanding that communion with the gods had been rare to nonexistent in the last few weeks.

“A message from Lady Hestia,” Hippolyta explained to her daughter. “Its contents

were unclear, however, and the Oracle asked for my presence so we could attempt to speak to the goddess directly. No such luck, I am afraid. We will have to await another message. As for your husband, he said he would join Nico Robin in the archives."

"He was not there," Artoria chimed in, her face set into a frown now. "I was just there to ask if she would be joining us. She will not. I doubt a herd of horses could pull her from your library."

Diana and Artoria shared a look.

"Robin?" Diana asked the air around them. "Where is he?"

"The arena," a pair of lips formed in midair spoke simply before dissolving into a flurry of petals.

There was a beat of silence as the four women all took the news with varying degrees of worry.

"He did promise to be on his best behaviour," Artoria tentatively offered some reassurance.

It worked.

Diana only powerwalked out of the room instead of running.

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They found him in the center of the arena sitting atop a pile of weapons as if a throne. Around him lay dozens of women, most sporting bruising or light injuries. Front and center was Donna, looking to have gotten the worst of it.

The four women froze at the scene before them.

It was not the signs of battle that froze them, as it was clear nobody was seriously hurt, but the literal scene playing out before them.

The sky's light was artificially dimmed by the illusion of a massive tree and roots that curved along the walls.

The floor was covered by an illusionary pool of water rimmed by white flowers dyed red by blood.

In the center, a massive scarlet flower bloomed.

"*The scarlet bloom flowers once more,*" the scarlet-haired woman said as she rose upon enormous wings, her nudity allowing the enraptured audience to see her three prosthetic limbs and lack of eyes. Illusory butterflies filled the arena. "*You will witness true horror. Now, rot!*"

She attacked, long golden blade sweeping down at her illusionary foe.

The crimson goddess's lunge was met midair by a dark-haired man clad in badland

leathers and wielding a blade that glowed blue. His lips moved, but no sound escaped them.

The dance of blades that followed was one Diana would never forget.

Over and under, at blistering speeds, they crashed, clashed, and wove their way together in a series of movements so coordinated, the heroine would have believed it to have been staged had each twitch of their bodies not furthered their goal of slaying the other.

The two fighters never touched the ground, a bird of red and gold dancing with one of black and blue.

No.

Not birds.

They were rivers, Diana realized as she watched the dance of death.

Flowing into each other, every move resulted from the preceding one and led to the next. There were no errors. No flaws. Every movement was so natural, so perfect, that to think of them doing anything else was alien.

This man and woman, these waterbirds, were harmonious. This was the art of violence at its peak. No extra flourishes. No embellishments or tricks.

Diana found herself envious of the scarlet woman.

Would she ever be able to dance like that?

But all things must come to an end, and the rapturous bout of violence could only end in one way.

Death.

Two blades impaled two chests, but only one fell.

"Your strength, extraordinary… The mark… of a true Lord…"

"The next time you think gender has anything to do with skill or danger or that I look down on you because you are women," Mikael spoke to the group around him, but his eyes never left the scarlet smile on the fallen woman's lips. "I want you all to remember this."

"O, dear Miquella…"

"A blind, crippled woman was the Elden Lord's greatest foe."

"O, dearest Miquella, my brother… I'm sorry. I finally met my match…"

The scarlet goddess died with a smile on her lips.

The illusion faded and, with it, the mood that had held everyone captive.

Mikael found himself inundated with questions and requests for rematches from a hoard of eager Amazons, Donna first among them. It shook him from the funk of reminiscence.

Mikael laughed at the clamour, standing atop the pile of weapons. He looked down at the group as a familiar blue blade appeared in his hands, his smile taunting but not cruel or mocking.

“If you all think you are the equal to the Blade of Miquella, I welcome the challenge. But you must prove yourself worthy if you want me to dance.”

Diana watched the familiar faces of her sisters bristle at the challenge and couldn’t help but smile at her husband.

This was what she had been looking for.

Not a recapture of her old world but a joining of her new one.

The past meeting the present for a better future.

Surrounded by friends, family, and Family, Diana felt at peace.

This was home.

Author's Note:

I AM HERE!

Exhausted, but here.

It's good to be back with the final part of volume 2, Tribunal. And this chapter marks the 400k mark for this fic (not counting ANs) so woohoo!

A light explanation for any who aren't aware of the specifics of the WC, one of the defences Mikeal chose was Paradox Defence, which also blocks forced teleportation. So the gods could not summon him. Thanks to the other defences, they also can't observe him through magic. So it was all on Hippolyta, but I think she acquitted herself well enough.

It's always nice writing opposing characters, and Mikael and Hippolyta are as diametrically opposed as people can get while maintaining some similarities. Especially if they are not explicitly enemies. It adds a tension that I find lacking when things can be solved with a simple fight.

I won't say much more, as things will ramp up as we head to the end of Volume 2. I will see you all next week.

PS: I have received a lot of questions about using my ideas (story or omakes). So here is my explicit permission to use whatever inspires you. Whether you want to write a complete fic or just an omake or one-shot, I wholeheartedly welcome you to use anything of mine that can help you. It is the greatest compliment a creator can receive when someone is inspired by their work.

I just have two requests.

When you release something, list what inspired you there for all to see. It may inspire your readers as well.

And tell me when you release it. I hope I get to enjoy your work.

PPS: For my QQ readers out there, let me get my random number generator. Give me a number between 1 and 25.

19... Elder Scrolls

One more for luck.

2... Westeros

Eh, what the hell. Give me one more on top of it.

22... Highschool DxD

I'll see you all next week

TRIBUNAL II

We passed upon the stair
We spoke of was and when
Although I wasn't there
He said I was his friend
Which came as some surprise
I spoke into his eyes
I thought you died alone
A long, long time ago
Oh no, not me
I never lost control
You're face to face
With the man who sold the world

“And here comes the ELDEN LORD!?” I heard some sort of TV announcer scream into their microphone as we landed on the red carpet.

Driving was for chumps who couldn’t fly.

“Elden Lord! What did you donate?”

“Elden Lord! Any truth to the rumours you are trying to marry Dragon next?”

“Elden Lord! How strong are you?”

“Elden Lord! Please bring back my husband! I’ll do anything!”

“Elden Lord, I’ll be your next consort!”

“”””Elden Lord! Elden Lord! Elden Lord! Elden Lord! Elden Lord! Elden Lord!””””

The flashing lights of the cameras, the clamour of reporters, the cheers and the venue’s noise were overwhelming to the poor little introverted abomination that I was.

So I did the only thing I could.

“Smile and wave, girls. Smile and wave.”

Of course, none of my severe discomfort showed on my face as I put on my best charming smile and waved to the crowd as I led Ranni and Yoruichi down the red carpet.

“Are you really a goddess?”

“Where is Panacea?”

“Marry me!”

“Who are you wearing?”

The gathered crowd exploded in noise, security having to actually fight back some more determined reporters and paparazzi who tried to climb the fence or duck under ropes. The only reason I didn’t flinch was because I was already pretending to be calm. This many people so close was sending my skin crawling.

I may have underestimated my fame a bit.

Smile and wave. Just smile and wave.

My companions bore the attention better than I.

Ranni's face was expressionless even as she lifted one of her four blue arms to wave, another wrapped around my left arm while the last two were held demurely in front of her. She had eschewed her hat and cloak, replacing it with a wolf fur shoulder wrap to let her long hair flow. Her silver dress was conservative, as was most of her wardrobe, but did nothing to hide the curves of her body.

Yoruichi, by contrast, had chosen to go with a backless purple dress, slit at the leg and showing generous cleavage. She wore it well, with feline grace and a composure that many women would envy. A playful smile flittered across her face as one arm lifted to the spectators.

It was easy to forget with her playful demeanour, but she had been raised as the Lady of a Noble House of Soul Society. She had led them, on top of being a Captain of the second Squad, for centuries before her exile to the human world. Yoruichi might not like stuffy politics, but she knew what to do.

That was one reason I had chosen her and Ranni to accompany me tonight.

"So, what's the plan tonight?" The shinigami asked me quietly from the side of her mouth, even as she continued to smile and wave.

"You know the plan," I answered just as discreetly.

A loud place like this was better for secrecy than any hidden room. The noise drowned out our words, but I weaved a light illusion over us anyway.

"Not that," Yoruichi wrapped her free arm around mine, leaving me with no hands to wave.

That was okay, I thought as I snaked them around my wives' waist and pulled them close. My hands had better things to do.

"You can't tell me you don't have a plan for a prank," she continued, her stride automatically adjusting to my hold. They were used to matching my pace, as I was generally a pretty cuddly type of guy. "Not tonight. It's too perfect an opportunity with too many targets. I want in."

"There will be no such thing," Ranni denied, sounding incredibly happy. "Our Lord hath promised me he shall maintain himself to the pinnacle of decorum and propriety."

Yoruichi sent me a quick, deadpan look before resuming her crowd work.

"She's right," I admitted. "Look at me."

"I am," the dark-skinned woman smirked as she sent me a smouldering look. Ranni glowered in her own way. "You clean up nice."

“I do,” I admitted with no shame.

I was in a classic suit and bowtie, black and white. No floral print, no shorts, no powerplay. I looked good.

It was terrible.

“Tonight, I am not Mikael, friendly neighbourhood dragon and househusband. I am The Elden Lord. A man of position and power. Dignity and gravitas.”

Ranni gave my arm an affectionate squeeze, happy as a clam any time I behaved as ‘befitting the title of Elden Lord.’

Yoruichi looked at me, her raised eyebrow asking me, ‘Really? You can’t be serious.’

“I shall observe all etiquette and formalities,” I continued as if I didn’t see it. “I shall not make a single pun nor bring up a topic unsuited for polite company. Any humour shall be high class, and my laughter subdued.” Even as Yoruichi looked more and more forlorn, Ranni radiated more blue Smug than ever before. “I shall be charming, witty, but not crass. I will converse about the weather and the economy and put forth my full effort to make you two the envy of every woman here.”

“I wouldn’t have agreed to come if you were going to be this boring,” Yoruichi sighed.

“And when people familiar ask me why I am acting different than usual, such as Superman, I will deny any difference at all. For I am the very picture of a modern Gentleman at all times. Those who I meet tonight will all agree.” Yoruichi’s frown froze before righting itself into her smirk, a small giggle escaping her throat. “Anyone not here tonight will have no choice but to believe the newspapers, articles, and people who will no doubt be interviewed about tonight. Leaving anyone who has met me in person before even more befuddled. And those who meet me in the future even more confused.”

Ranni sighed in fond exasperation.

“At least I shall have tonight,” she muttered to herself. “Thy madness can wait for the morrow.”

“I love it,” my other companion said with a thumbs-up as we were ushered into the building. “Should I play along? Act all stuffy?”

“You act however you want,” I said graciously as we passed servers, guards, and several other staff Stark had hired for the gala. “Just by being here, you are playing your part.” Yoruchi sent me a curious look, so I explained. “The video? Of Glory Girl’s resurrection? The one everyone in the world has seen?”

“They’ve all seen me naked.” Golden eyes widened in realization.

Yoruichi knew about the internet and modern communications. She knew that night at the park had been filmed without us being aware, but it never sank in. She had never really given thought to what it meant for her in particular since she rarely, if ever,

interacted with the average person.

The internet was such a new thing to her, relatively speaking, that the centuries-old woman hadn't internalized what it meant to be caught naked on camera and for the footage to leak and become the most-watched video of all time.

"They did," I smirked. "And now everyone has to go the entire night, surrounded by the richest and most powerful men and women in the world, acting like they haven't. It will be all they can think about when we are talking. While I drone on about economic policy, they will be thinking about your bare ass."

"Mikael," Ranni sighed.

"Apologies," I straightened my shoulders and formally bowed to Yoruichi. "That was crude of me. I shall not bring it up again."

Yoruichi's breathing had become shallow, her eyes dilated in desire, and her erect nipples pressing into her dress clearly.

"You," she said, her breathing husky with desire. "Are a terrible man."

"When married to so many women," I explained with a smirk. "I must find ways of satisfying more than one at a time."

I was not only giving Ranni the 'ballroom' experience she wanted as a princess of Carria, but I was also triggering every one of Yoruichi's exhibitionist tendencies while doing it. And with people like the stuffy nobles she hated.

I had no doubt I would have to deal with a cat in heat when we were done tonight.

It was regrettable, but I could put off interrogating the Faerie Queen's Spirit till tomorrow.

Truly, I lived a life burdened by terrible responsibility.

I had to fight to maintain a charming but relaxed smile instead of a wild grin as we finally reached the stupidly large ballroom.

Tony Stark, in his typical flamboyance, had gone all out. Symbols of heroes, flags, the PRT, and memorial plaques hung on the walls like banners.

Around the back of the hall, sets of tables were laid out, mini alters on each to showcase the variety of donations the patrons could anonymously bid on. A table for food was set aside, almost forgotten in the hubbub of people, as well-dressed servers walked the room laden with drinks.

A large stage, currently occupied by a band, overlooked a large dancefloor where a few couples danced to a slow beat. Around the center of the room, the rich and powerful mingled, talked, and made plans to shape the world.

I was sure more business deals would be made tonight than on any other day of the year.

And all under the looming figures of the Endbringers.

Three statues stood along the walls of the massive room, one on each wall not occupied by the stage. Behemoth and Leviathan shrunk to half-scale their actual size, but Simurgh's statue was life-size, her wings folded over herself to tastefully hide her nudity. The Ziz statue was placed opposite the stage, behind the tables of donations.

All this was the same as last year's Endbringer Charity Gala.

New this year were the massive white teeth that framed the back wall, poised to swallow the smallest Endbringer whole.

"Mikael! You made it! And with such fine company." A loud, self-assured voice greeted us as we took in the sight of the ballroom. Several eyes turned to us as Tony Stark walked up, accompanied by two redheads, one male and one female. I recognized them both. "I was worried you wouldn't come."

"Mr. Stark, I would not miss this for a world," I greeted the billionaire with a polite smile and a shake of hands. "You've met them before, but this is Shihouin Yoruichi and Ranni. Two of my wives. Ladies, this is Tony Stark, the Invincible Iron Man."

"A pleasure," Yoruichi said with a dip of her head.

All three sets of eyes flashed to her, and I saw them flash with recognition and desire. I internally grinned, but my face retained its polite curve as Ranni held out one of her hands.

To his credit, it only took a heartbeat for Tony Stark to understand the gesture, his genius mind no doubt flashing through hundreds of scenarios before he dipped his head to gently brush his lips against the extended fingers.

I saw his eyes flash to me, but I looked on, as if his kissing of her hand was perfectly normal and pretended not to notice the way the redheaded woman's eyes narrowed.

"Greetings, Man of Iron," Ranni said softly as she dipped her head in the barest of movements. Acknowledgement of his existence and nothing else.

Princesses. Am I right?

"And your companions? I do not believe I've had the pleasure," I prompted despite knowing who they were, unwilling to let a pissing match start between the two.

Call a goddess a blueberry one too many times, and she will never let it go.

"Pepper Potts," the woman spoke for herself, extending her hand in an imitation of Ranni's earlier gesture. I saw Yoruichi's mouth twitch up in amusement as I responded much more fluidly than Stark had, repeating his light brush across her fingers.

If I wasn't honouring my promise to Ranni, I would have done something… amusing, but I held myself back.

"My much better half," Iron Man continued as I straightened. "She runs Stark

Industries and her own non-profit while I am off galavanting with dragons and demons. And this is my drink… my buddy Lex. We've been pals since college. He was recently elected senator here in New York." He stumbled over the words 'drinking buddy', and I did note his cup drink of choice for the night was non-alcoholic.

"Alexander Luthor Jr." The redheaded man held out his hand, glossing over Tony's fumble, and I shook it. "Please call me Lex. It is an honour."

"Mikael," I greeted. "I am afraid I do not follow politics, but I will congratulate you on the win nonetheless."

"Thank you," he nodded graciously. "It is not much, but I am trying to do my part. I hope my new position will allow me to help more people. But it is nothing compared to what you have done for us."

"Do not denigrate thy victory," Ranni lightly admonished. "While the notion of 'democracy' is foreign to me, leaders and rulers must maintain pride in themselves and their achievements. Only then will their retainers entrust them with their hopes."

"I will bow to your wisdom, Goddess," the redhead said with a smile. "But I meant what I said. I may help in some small way, but I am not the one who rid the world of an Endbringer. The Simurgh at that. We all cannot thank you enough."

"I am curious," Yoruichi chimed in, looking to the back wall where the fifteen-foot tall statue of the Simurgh stood, surrounded by massive teeth. "Why did you decide to put in those? Why not simply remove the statue? She's dead."

"Like it?" Tony grinned. "I'm pretty proud of the idea myself. Now that we know they can be killed, I figured I could give people some incentive. I'll announce this later when the auction is done, but from now on, anyone who kills an Endbringer gets their own statue to commemorate it on top of the reward money."

"One day, there will be no more Endbringers," Pepper continued. "Tonight is not just about celebrating the fallen or raising money for those hurt, but also to give hope."

"And what will you do when more show up? This room isn't big enough for much more, even if they are scaled down."

"I have a gallery if it comes to that," Iron Man sighed at Yoruichi's question. "Let's hope it doesn't, yeah? Three. I like three. A nice round, small number. A lot of good things come in threes."

"Even if more did show up," I tried to lighten the mood. "They won't be a problem now that you know how to kill them. I'm sure you already have a bunch of ideas for getting their cores."

"Cores?" Luthor asked, and Pepper looked curious as well. Tony's eyes narrowed in confusion.

“It’s how I destroyed the Simurgh and how the Endbringers operate,” I explained, not getting into how I had done so. “They have cores that project their bodies in this dimension. Their bodies are like clothes. No matter how damaged they get, they aren’t the Endbringers themselves. Destroy the core, and the things are gone for good.”

“Really?” Tony asked, rubbing at his goatee contemplatively. “I hadn’t heard anything about cores, or I would have worked on something. Have you told anyone else about them?”

“I told Dr. Strange,” I answered with a frown. Both Luthor and Stark frowned in turn. “I thought he would have told others.”

“He didn’t tell me,” Tony shook his head. “It is good to know now. I will talk to him tomorrow. For now, eat, drink, talk and spend ludicrous money. My favourite hobbies.” Pepper rolled her eyes but smiled at her husband fondly.

“Mine too,” Yoruichi said with an easy smile. “So, if you will excuse me, I shall get a drink. Save me a dance?”

“Of course, dear,” I answered as she pecked me on the cheek and sauntered her way to the tables laden with alcohol and attended by servers.

“Lady Potts,” Ranni said. “Might I request formal introductions? I am unfamiliar with the women of note in this world.”

“I’d be happy to,” Pepper agreed easily. “I have a few friends that would love to meet you.”

“Then I shall quit you for the moment, My Lord,” Ranni said with a slight bow of the head to me and a look at the other two men. “Gentlemen.”

And then the redhead led the Goddess away, leaving me alone with Iron Man and Eidolon.

It was, once again, thanks to my promise to Ranni that I didn’t make a pun about the irony of the situation.

Between Tony Stark, Lex Luthor, and myself, I didn’t know who had the most oversized ego.

I took solace in that mine was at least proportional to my body.

******

Yoruichi, drink in hand, faded from the foreground of the party.

She wasn’t using any powers or actively hiding, but she was diminishing her presence to the point where most people’s eyes would slide right over her.

A bit of a shame after Mikael’s delicious prank on her, but for the moment, the former

shinigami captain wanted to survey the room without being watched in turn.

She would be getting back at him later.

The shinigami's role tonight was small but significant. If Emma found anything, Yoruichi would be the one to deal with it.

For now, she just enjoyed her drink as she watched the people mingle. Heroes mixing with the rich and famous in a chaotic mess that had her grinning in amusement.

Superman deftly fended off the attention of a gaggle of starlets. The Flash wasn't nearly as successful with a couple of businessmen, the yellow hero clearly uncomfortable judging by how much he shifted and twitched, even as he demolished a plate of food.

One day, when she was a higher tier, Yoruichi wanted to race him.

It wouldn't do for the Goddess of Flash to lose her title to a man, now would it?

Captain America was chatting amicably with European dignitaries while Myrddin performed some tricks for a group of celebrities. At the same time, Rime danced with a movie star Yoruichi was unfamiliar with, and Vixen deftly manipulated a bunch of young men.

Some heroes were here incognito, of course.

Bruce Wayne was surprisingly subdued, talking with some wealthy entrepreneurs instead of carousing. Oliver Queen danced with his fiance to the slow beat of the band. Shuri, princess of Wakanda, and her wife Ororo Munroe walked between the tables of donations, occasionally making bids. Sunspot was here as Roberto Da Costa, a billionaire in his own right and trying to put moves on the White Queen.

Yoruichi smiled maliciously at that last one. She hoped Emma wouldn't have too much fun at the man's expense. Or at least not without telling her about it later.

Other heroes, those without secret identities, also walked the hall.

Charles Xavier, accompanied by Warren Worthington III, was talking with Silvija Sablinova. Zatanna sauntered between guests, occasionally doing a magic trick at their request and shooting challenging looks Myrddin's way.

Only about a fifth of all people present were 'in costume', but the actual number of supers in the room was closer to a third.

And Yoruichi had investigated almost all of them.

Thanks to a mixture of Emma and Diana's experience, as well as Mikael's meta knowledge, Yoruichi had spent the months since landing on Earth confirming or denying some preconceived notions of who was who, as well as abilities.

Most of the Family's foreknowledge panned out, but there were a few clear exceptions.

Yoruichi's eyes slid to her husband, and her smile fell into a frown at his current

companions. Tony Stark, despite his intelligence, was of little concern. Unless he invented some of his more… outlandish armours she had heard about, there was little risk of him posing a threat to the Family.

On the other hand, Alexander Luthor was a headache and a half.

According to Mikael and corroborated by Diana, Lex Luthor was a villain in most continuities. A genius-level intellect leading a multi-trillion dollar company, the man was a staunch enemy of Superman in all his forms. Protected by an army of lawyers, the man usually managed to roam free even if it was a public secret that he was a villain.

Only here, that wasn't the case at all.

Or at least, as far as Yoruichi could find.

Certainly, some 'rogue experiments' had been linked to Luthor's company, such as Bizarro, but the CEO always claimed they had been accidents. His actions, charitable donations, philanthropic work, and general actions as a political figure also lined up with his narrative as a good guy.

Then there was his powers.

As Eidolon, Luthor had one of the most diverse and powerful skill sets of any hero on the planet. More importantly, he was not the 'Eidolon' Mikael was familiar with. That one had been, unconsciously, responsible for the existence of the Endbringers, so of course, he was a subject of concern for the Family.

But things weren't lining up.

There shouldn't *be* an Eidolon in this world where the two Entities were alive but brain dead.

The only reason that power, the 'High Priest' Mikael had called it, existed in Worm was that one of the Entities had died, and its body was scavenged for powers. Otherwise, there was no way the multi-dimensional worms would have released one of their primary abilities to the natives of this world.

After landing on Earth, Mikael wanted her to locate the man believed to be Eidolon, possibly for assassination. It had been a simple job.

She had followed the hero as a cat and watched him return from a shift as a PRT hero, go to a house in Houston, the city he operated out of, turn into a middle-aged man, then disappear entirely from her spiritual senses.

Only by following his spirit ribbon, the unique wavelength of all souls, could Yoruichi correlate the overweight middle-aged man with Lex Luthor.

The redheaded bastard had four power slots, not three like everyone believed. One of which he used to create a body double to act as either Eidolon or himself. If the powers were the same as the Eidolon from the book, he probably wasn't responsible for the

Endbringers, who had one slot dedicated to sustaining them, limiting his abilities to only three.

Which left the Family with a situation on their hands.

Eidolon was undoubtedly a hero, a bit aggressive, but there was no doubt he was a hero. He had never acted in any way contrary to that. Combined with the lack of even a hint of evil from Luthor, they could not justify killing the man or removing his power. Especially since doing so wasn't guaranteed to stop the Endbringers.

It hadn't stopped them in the book.

So the Family was content to watch him for now, prepared to act if it looked like Luthor was going down the road of his comic counterpart.

And as Yoruichi watched Luthor introduce Mikael to another senator, she was surprised when a young voice spoke to her.

"Can you turn into a cat? Please? And introduce me to your husband?"

Yoruichi didn't jump; she was too experienced to do so, but her head did whirl to meet the young girl's gaze staring up at her, eyes wide with wonder and a broad smile on her lips.

******

"And this is Emma Frost of Frost Pharmaceuticals," Tony introduced with a playful glare. "Don't let her pretty warm demeanour fool you. She's a cold bitch."

"Stark," Frost nodded back, her voice an unamused drawl. "Must you be so crass? It is Frost Enterprises now, as you well know. Jealousy is such an ugly colour on you. What would Pepper say?"

"Do it again?" Stark said with a laugh. Despite the barbs, the conversation was friendly in a rival sort of way. "Emma, Mikael. Mikael, Emma."

"A pleasure, miss," I bowed and kissed her hand as I had done to all the women I had met tonight. Wouldn't want anyone feeling left out, now would I? And Ranni was the one who started it, so she couldn't even complain.

"Yes," the platinum blond purred, mouth curving into a pleased smile. "It is."

"And your companion," I nodded at the woman beside her.

"White Queen," the woman held out a white-gloved hand, and I took it, lingering longer on it than anyone else that night before straightening. Blue eyes behind a mask crinkled in pleasure, and silver-painted lips quirked in a pleased smile.

Both women were dressed in white, to little surprise, but where Frost wore a long evening gown, Emma was in more comfortable and easy to move in attire.

For her, at least.

Leather pants, a corset, and a fur-lined cloak were not what I considered comfortable, but man, did I like the look. Her face was covered in a mask of white diamond, leaving only her hair, eyes, nose and mouth exposed.

“My bodyguard,” Frost explained with an amused smile. “She’s relatively new on the super scene, but she has been making her name known.”

“She was a major help with that whole mess in Australia and helping coordinate the Doomsday response,” Stark said, his smile just as amused as all the others as his eyes flittered between the two women.

“Thank you,” Emma said with a tilt of her head. “My duties to Miss Frost leave little time for heroics, but I try when I can.”

‘Don’t laugh,’ Emma’s voice echoed in my head. ‘No matter how much you want to, don’t laugh.’

‘But it’s so goddamn funny,’ I complained, using all my considerable self-control not to burst out.

‘I know.’

All four of us stood there for a second, polite yet amused smiles exchanged between us.

We all believed they were ‘in’ on a joke the others were unaware of.

Tony Stark believed that the ‘White Queen’ was just a body double. An excuse for Emma Frost to use her powers while maintaining the fiction that she was a regular if skilled, businesswoman. He found my ignorance funny.

Frost found it amusing that Stark was unaware that both women were the same person from different dimensions. They were both Emma Frosts, with the same power and goals. She knew her counterpart was my wife but believed me to be ignorant of her ‘true’ plans. She laughed internally at duping two men.

Emma and I?

We were laughing at both of them.

Emma, because she still hated her past self and was using her. For her resources and to prove a point to me.

I internally laughed because the situation was funny.

Fun fact, while I was ‘freeing’ a telepath, it meant their abilities bypassed all mental barriers, and the owners were unaware. In a room with some of the world’s richest, most powerful people, my wife had access to all their minds, and no one had any idea.

How could I not find that funny?

No matter the awkwardness between Emma and me, sometimes a couple needs to

have fun together. That this meeting was the culmination of weeks of work and would allow for more in the future made the situation all the better for me.

Even as the conversation continued, I continued to chortle inwardly as I subtly cast an illusion to hide that my fingers were still slightly touching the White Queen's gloves.

"Emma's recent moves have placed her as the wealthiest woman in the world," Tony explained. "What is your net worth now? Eighty billion?"

"Ninety-seven," Frost corrected. "And it was good luck. I met some talented people and made a few deals."

'He's staking her out to join the Illuminati,' Emma told me.

'Who are the other members?'

"What sort of deals?" I asked out loud. "My experience with business is, I am afraid, quite limited."

'Xavier, who brought her to their attention after I helped with the Hellfire Club, Batman, Strange, Luthor and Peter Parker are their current members. The last was added recently after Doom, and Reed Richards retired. They are looking for one more member.'

'Anything we should be aware of?'

"Only the biggest merger in business history," Tony drawled sarcastically.

'Their main goal is the survival of Earth. You are currently the biggest risk, even more than the Endbringers. They don't plan to attack, not confident they can win, but they would love to know more about you and us.'

'That's fine. Is anyone here our mastermind? Our 'hand' behind the curtain?'

"You are exaggerating," Frost denied with false humility. There was a pleased lilt to her lips. "It is just a few other companies wish to come under the Frost name for mutual benefit. It hasn't even passed through regulation yet."

'You are the worst,' Emma mentally sighed at me.

'If I can't make puns out loud, let me make them in my mind! I need to get my fix, damn it!'

"It will," Iron Man insisted. "The market would not have reacted like that if there was any chance of it being shot down. The Frost name has practically become a Zaibatsu in its own right."

'The worst. And Robin should stop encouraging you. But no, nobody here is bankrolling the hand or is their shadowy leader, as far as I can tell. I can only go so fast through all these minds.'

'Focus on the ones with protections. The others can wait for a later day.'

'I know.'

"Then, can either of you help me?" I asked, and both turned to me, looking intrigued.

“I need recommendations for who to contact about getting a singing career off the ground. One of my wives, Priscilla, wishes to pursue music, and I always support their hobbies.” I had their curiosity, now to get their attention. “I would consider it a personal favour, and money is no object.”

“Really?” Stark asked, looking intrigued, but he was beaten to the punch by Frost.

“My company did gain a record label in a recent bid,” she explained. “Not a famous one, but I had planned to expand into the entertainment industry.” Of course you did. That is why I asked. “Your wife is a fabulous singer, and I would love to sign her on.”

“It would mean a lot to her and to me.”

“Will you be joining her?” Frost asked eagerly. “You are also quite good.”

“Perhaps I will join her once or twice on stage if it wouldn’t be a problem? I am not star material, however. Too introverted.”

Stark gave me a look of complete disbelief that I ignored. It was technically accurate. I just faked being an extrovert really well to achieve my goals.

“I disagree, but we can iron out details later. Here is my card,” she handed me a business card, white with silver writing. “We will need to go through a bit of a process, image, song choice, and other such bothers, but I see no reason this cannot be the start of a *long*, profitable relationship.”

‘Told you,’ Emma transmitted smug satisfaction to me.

‘I never denied that Emma Frost would want the benefits I could provide. Most women won’t turn down eternal youth and a bunch of powers,’ I mentally sighed, wishing I could roll my eyes. ‘I denied that she could come to love me as you do without going through the same thing. Without changing who she is.’

“You work fast,” Tony said to the woman with a shake of his head.

‘We shall see,’ Emma continued to sound smug.

‘We don’t have to,’ I replied, almost pleading.

“Never let an opportunity slip away,” Frost answered, completely unrepentant.

‘Yes, we do,’ she insisted. ‘Or you will continue to doubt me and my love for you.’

‘I don’t doubt your love,’ I insisted in turn.

‘But you doubt your trust in me. In the very nature of our relationship. Emma Frost will fall in love with Mikael. Without any mind control. I’ll prove it to you.’

‘You hate her!’ I tried a different tact.

‘I do. I hate her. I hate what she, I, did. I hate what I would have done. I am glad to be who I am. The person I was before is not who I am now. You have to accept it. And the truth is I love you more than I hate her.’

What was I supposed to say to that?

The simple truth was I had mind-controlled Emma.

On accident, sure, but there was no getting around the fact that the Emma Frost summoned to the Island died when she invaded the mind of an Eldrich monster. The woman who replaced her might have her habits, face, and memories, but the core of her being was dyed in my colour.

Two Emma Frosts stood before me, one a white diamond and the other a white dragon scale.

I had done the one thing I had never wanted to do, and there was nothing I could do, even with my limitless power, to undo it.

We still loved each other and still worked together, but there was tension between us. A tension born from my guilt and fear and her 'betrayal' while I was imprisoned.

Just because I now understood her motivations at the time didn't mean it didn't still hurt that she had gone behind my back. I was in a really dark place after that, and if it weren't for meeting Melina so soon (relatively), I do not know what I would have done or become.

Combining that with our different ideas and goals, Emma arguing for active involvement on my part in shaping the world while I wished to remain more passive, and things got awkward pretty quickly whenever we weren't 'working.'

The awkwardness returned, so I focused on the physical world once more.

"Have you placed any bids," Frost asked me as we walked along the tables laden with depictions of donations.

Some were objects, like a yacht, a car, or even a mansion, but others were experiences. Tickets to cruises or events. One was for a weekend getaway to a *highly* exclusive lodge and country club in the Rockies. The kind of place that wasn't even online, only known about through word of mouth.

"I have not had the chance to peruse the offers yet," I admitted. "Tony has been kind enough to act as host and introduce me to everyone, which has occupied my time. I am afraid, however, that my tastes are different than humans. I do not believe I will find much here of interest, so I will content myself with the donation I gave and the money it will bring for the charity."

I indicated the small statue as we walked by it, and they stopped to read the description on the card next to it.

The statue was one of Medea's lesser works, only about a foot in height. It depicted my dragon form curled protectively around the Jewel, six wings spread and my long neck extended as yellow eyes seemed to watch the people as they passed by.

"Does it work" Tony asked curiously.

“It does,” I nodded at Frost to try it after she finished reading the card that explained what it was and what it did. She did, hand extending to lightly touch the top of the dragon’s head as she muttered the ‘magic words’.

“Muda muda muda.”

I had to bite my cheek, hard to keep from laughing out loud even as Emma sent me a glare.

“Hmm,” Frost hummed as she glowed a pale white for a fraction of a second. “How wonderful. I imagine it will fetch a large price. I am tempted to bid myself.”

“What language is that?” Tony asked me.

“Japanese,” I answered glibly, my voice calm despite my hysterical internal laughter. “It means wastefulness. I believed it was appropriate for something like this.”

“And it clears hangovers, too,” Frost verified, and I nodded. “Incredibly useful. I might have to ask for one myself if we work together. It is made with your scales?”

“Yes,” I lied. “Shards of them, at least. One of my complete scales would be the size of this city.”

Of course I wasn’t stupid enough to actually use my body parts to make this thing. Ignoring the possibility of cloning, voodoo, or targeted scrying, since the Defences protected against those, having parts of me floating around the world was just a bad idea for everyone involved.

Instead, Medea had dyed some drake scales white and infused them with a targeted version of the ‘cleanse’ spell I knew. I had gotten the idea from my night out with Superman and Batman. It only worked on alcohol and its effects, not poison, but I was sure plenty of people would pay for an on-demand hangover cure that also cleared all alcohol from their system.

This little ‘donation’ served four purposes.

One, it was Jojo reference.

Two, it was a subtle dig at whoever bought it, calling them and their wealth worthless. I also appreciated the idea of a statue of me looking at some hung-over schmuck and judging them.

Three, it served as my ticket to the gala in the first place. I could have just shown up, and I doubt they would have turned me away, but it looked better this way.

And four, it was bait.

Someone out there, someone who had broken into the Sanctum Sanctorum, stolen from the Sorcerer Supreme, and tried to steal weapons from me, was plotting against me and my Family. Even if they weren’t here tonight and Emma didn’t find them, they were bound to hear about this statue made from ‘my’ scales.

A statue with a tracking spell on it.

And, since it was made and donated before tonight, I wasn't breaking my promise to Ranni to not get up to shenanigans.

"I do believe I need another drink now if you will excuse me, gentlemen," Frost said as she dipped her head at me. "Elden Lord. Meeting with you was an absolute pleasure, and I hope we will talk soon. Stark, thank you for hosting another wonderful evening, and I look forward to the auction."

"A stone-cold bitch, but man, do I love watching her walk away," Iron Man sighed as Frost and Emma left us for the drink table, talking mentally to each other, I am sure.

It was a good thing I wasn't a jealous man, or I would have sucker punched the man.

But I was a petty man, and the opportunity was too perfect.

"Hello again, Ms. Potts," I greeted loudly.

Tony started, spinning to see his wife standing behind him.

His unamused wife.

"Elden Lord, may I have a moment with my husband?"

"Of course," I said with a polite smile. "I was just about to go look for my own partners. I believe I owe them some dances. Enjoy the rest of the night."

My good deed done for the night, I went in search of Ranni, judging her to be the most likely to want to dance.

Yoruichi found me first.

"Oh, sweetie," she singsonged playfully, instantly putting me on edge. Yoruichi had never called me that before, and she looked like the cat who got the canary. Or the dragon. "I have someone I'd like you to meet."

"I would be happy to," I answered, wondering where she was going with this.

She gestured to a man behind her, a famous one, accompanied by a young girl, no older than thirteen at most.

"Reed Richards," the retired hero said, shaking my hand. I fought not to flinch as we touched. What the fuck? "My daughter, Valeria Richards, is a big fan of yours."

'Emma!' I called in my mind.

"Hello, Elden Lord," the young girl curtsied, a broad smile on her face as she gazed up at me.

'What's wrong?'

'Are you getting anything from this guy?'

'No. There is no mind there.'

'That's what I thought. He's a robot. Not the self-aware kind either, like Dragon. The girl is real, though. So why is a little girl here with a puppet?'

‘The girl… Something is wrong with her. Seriously wrong.’

“Your wife won’t be able to get anything from me,” the smartest girl in the world told me, smile undiminished.

‘Her mind’s not protected. She’s letting me in,’ Emma explained. ‘But it is wrong. Bent. It’s been moulded deliberately. Forced into a certain shape.’

‘Who did this to her?’ I asked, planning on freeing her as soon as we got a private moment.

“I need your help,” Valeria Richards continued.

Her smile was honestly creepy, but then again, I thought all little girls were creepy.

‘She did it to herself.’

“We need to save the world.”

That was when the Endbringer sirens started screaming.

Author's Note:

Mwahahahaha!

It was I, Cliffhanger!

A short but dense chapter this week as we ramp up Tribunal. A lot of breadcrumbs I've been laying out coming together, but the complete picture hasn't been painted yet. For context, this occurs the same evening of the last chapter, less than a day after the end of Probation.

I will see you all next week.

PS: Here are the intro songs for part 2 of volume 2 for those curious.

Furlough 1: Heroes, David Bowie

Furlough 2: Something Just Like This, The Chainsmokers & Coldplay

Furlough 3: We Don't Need Another Hero, Tina Turner

Furlough 4: Jukebox Hero, Foreigner

SS 1: Caribbean Queen, Billy Ocean

SS 2: What She's Doing Now, Garth Brooks

Furlough 5: Superman's Song, Crash Test Dummies

Furlough 6: Hero, Nickelback

Furlough 7: Hero of Our Time, NateWantsToBattle

SS 3: Hero, David Crosby & Phil Collins

SS 4: In All My Dreams I Drown, Jessica Lowndes & Terrance Zdunich

SS 5: Wonder Woman, John Legend

SS 6: Burn, Deep Purple

TRIBUNAL III

I remember you
We would've died intertwined
We talked in tongues of a kinship
We could only deny
Now you think you're anonymous
A masked face without a name
But I know you're one of us
Underneath you're still the same
And I remember you
I remember you

The stage was set.

The actors donned their costumes.

The supporting characters practiced their lines.

The props were in their places.

The monster approached, ready to do battle against the heroes of justice.

A tried and true story. Good vs. Evil. Monster vs. man.

The world watched on, tentative hope kindling in their hearts like a soft ember ready to be roused into an inferno.

The stage was set for the fourth miracle of a new world.

******

Endbringers were major cockblocks.

And I had been doing such a good job of staying out of Brockton Bay since reviving Victoria and getting my body back.

I watched heroes arrive, congregate, aid in evacuation and prepare for the coming fight.

There was a nervous optimism in the air, faces were set into determined lines, and awkward laughter occasionally rang out as friends and teammates greeted each other, but there was no sense of defeat or resignation. Just hope and conviction.

It was all suitably heroic.

All I could think about was that I should be getting freaky with Yoruichi after hours of teasing her.

Or at least doing something else productive instead of killing time as twilight set in here in Brockton Bay and Behemoth made his plodding way here from underground.

I could be interrogating the Faerie Queen, cuddling my wives, trying to get an explanation out of Valeria Richards, sleeping with my wives, or trolling someone.

Instead, I sat twiddling my thumbs and fiddling with the cybernetic bracelet we had all been given while Ranni quietly seethed at her ruined date night, Yoruichi teased her about it, and other heroes pretended not to shoot us glances. There was some fear there, mostly at me, but also hope, envy, and a whole bunch of other emotions that ran the entire spectrum.

"Are you nervous," a voice shook me from my bored funk.

"No," I answered Beast Boy honestly as I looked him over.

I had only interacted a little with the Teen Titans since the Trigon incident, but Glynda and Raven had kept me abreast of them in the last few weeks. The green-skinned hero looked physically just the same as before, nor did I see any difference in how he held himself, staring up at me with a nervous, awkward smile.

"Right, me neither," he said with clearly false bravado, looking between me, my wives, and the heroes that kept arriving. "This is my seventh Endbringer fight, you know? We got this."

Even as we spoke, speedsters, airplanes, jets, teleporters, and other heroes with Mover ratings were delivering more costumed individuals from all over the world and taking away civilians. I had only been here for five minutes, and already over fifty heroes were in this plaza. Protectorate heroes and the Justice League, obviously, but also the X-men, the Guild, the Winter Guard, the Yangban, and a bunch of others I didn't recognize.

"We do," I agreed with a calm smile which seemed to reassure the shapeshifter. He clenched his fists, took a deep breath, and nodded at me. "Relax. You've all repelled them every time before, and the only difference this time is you'll kill it. Behemoth won't even know how it died."

"Thanks," Beast Boy grinned, punching his fists together. "How did you kill the Simurgh anyway?"

"I destroyed her core," I answered with a shrug. "All Endbringers' have a core, a brain if you will. Break that, and they go bye-bye for good. Behemoth's is buried deep at the base of his throat, between his shoulders if I remember right. Don't quote me on that."

"Are you going to eat it like you did to Ziz?" Mercury asked as she joined us.

"I shouldn't need to," I shrugged again. "Even if we ignore the damage doing that would do to the country, taking a chunk out of the planet isn't the best idea."

One of the reasons I was not busying myself with preparations or aiding evacuations or anything like that was because I plain didn't think it was necessary.

I had no intention of underestimating the Endbringers.

In Worm, they had been sandbagging hard, using barely a fraction of their abilities to facilitate a steady increase in challenge. A constant ramp-up intended to last centuries as humans learned and adapted, always just out of their reach, always a looming threat. Every time the heroes matched them, there would be a slight increase in difficulty that saw exponentially more deaths on the defender's side.

With the Simurgh dead, and a risk it could be destroyed, there was every possibility that Behemoth would go all out from the start. Collateral would be huge, no matter how many evacuations continued.

But this world was not Worm.

This was a world with heroes from DC and Marvel. Deathworlds so overpowered that the only reason that life still existed was because their defenders were as absurd as the attackers. They dealt with more significant threats than the Endbringers every year, if not every few months.

Even with the Endbringers holding back less than in the book, all their abilities operating at about a third more powerful, the heroes of this world were simply better. More diverse and less reliant on superpowers that didn't *want* to defeat the monsters.

Even after six years of receiving an attack from one of three Enbringers every few months, this world still didn't have an Endbringer Truce because it didn't *need* one.

The death toll among heroes who fought them wasn't one in four on average, like in the book, but one in ten. The highest had been the first fight against the Simurgh at one in five. And that included all the Ziz bombs that were after-effects and not part of the original attack.

Take this attack, for example.

The sirens had gone off fifteen minutes ago, indicating that Behomoth was on the move and through tinker tech, magic, or some super genius, they judged that it would attack Brockton Bay. Within the first minute, Dragon drones, Iron Man suits and a bunch of other robots or drones were out transporting heroes to the city or evacuating civilians. Within the first five minutes, the available Justice League and PRT members on duty had been teleported in. Within ten, most of the off-duty members were here as well.

Here we were, fifteen minutes after the initial siren wail and still waiting for the attack.

In the book, the defenders had a fraction of the time we had to prepare.

It showed in how the gala attendees had, instead of rushing off at the first sound, said their goodbyes calmly and then just walked out of the building towards a Stark aircraft.

Valeria Richards and the fake Reed hadn't even done that, just passing me a business card with a smile and inviting me to the Baxter Building to talk before wandering off to

eat.

Not even my Family were worried.

I had, of course, told them all I knew about Worm, Shards, the Entities, and the Endbringers. Most of us had gathered in this plaza a few minutes ago to hash out a game plan, but we had gone our separate ways. Either to get a feel for the terrain, talk to some heroes, or set up preparations, in Medea's case. Priscilla had remained on the Island, and we hadn't contacted the three women still on Themyscria because, quite frankly, they weren't needed.

This wasn't like the Doomsday or Trigon situations. We knew about this threat and could take in a straight-up fight with little issue to the Family itself. With the aid of the heroes here? It wasn't even a question of whether we could kill it but how long it would take us.

While only a few of us could kill Behemoth without resorting to cataclysmic damages, I didn't think the Endbringer could kill us without getting sloppy. Energy manipulation was simply a bad matchup against the Defences the catalogue provided. Most of the worst effects it could do were explicitly blocked by Wild and Environmental Defence.

The only two Endbringers worse off would be the Simurgh, who couldn't see us at all thanks to relying solely on predictions to interact with the world, and Khonsu, who used time-based attacks that would do nothing to immortals like us.

Hell, Scathach was excited about the fight. I bet she could take the damn thing on with little issue with a combination of Primordial Runes and her Noble Phantasm. The rest of us were almost unnecessary, here to limit collateral damage rather than actually fight.

I might be a paranoid bastard, cowardly even, but I was not someone who couldn't recognize his own strength. I simply strived to see things as objectively as possible.

And objectively, Behemoth was fucked.

The Endbringers in this world were not called that because they were seen as symbols of an inevitable apocalypse. They weren't engines of destruction that slowly ground away civilization below their boots. They were called Endbringers because they couldn't be killed.

They returned no matter what the heroes had tried. Destroying, trapping, or banishing them never worked permanently. They were figures of fear, yes, but more out of resignation and dread than terror. The fear of the unknown, what they could pull off next or what nasty trick they would reveal, rather than fear of the monsters themselves, frightened most people.

Where did they come from? How did they work? What was their goal? How many were there? Was it all random?

Such questions had plagued humanity since Behemoth's first appearance.

An Enbringer attack was like an extra dangerous monsoon. It came and went, ruining buildings and killing people, but this world had gotten really good at rebuilding. You can even predict it roughly like a monsoon, and there was an 'Endbringer season' where you can expect an attack. At the end of the day, the Endbringers were always forced to retreat, even though this world lacked Scion, and most attacks ended with most of their targets surviving.

The Simurgh had been an exception because it had deliberately targeted human psychology, turning the heroes against the people they defended.

Now though? Now that I had broken the passive stranger effect that kept people from realizing Endbringer's weakness was a core?

Now the world could kill them.

I could think of a dozen heroes off the top of my head who could kill Behemoth with a little help and twice as many that could work together to do it. Mostly magic users, but others who used Shard-based powers. Tinkers or heroes whose powers came from unique biology were not suited to fight the energy manipulator, but many other abilities were.

I just had to sit back and eat popcorn.

Metaphorically, of course.

"I'm going to be playing support for this one," I told the pair of Teen Titans. "I can be more helpful healing with Tsunade and Melina than out on the field. I do my best work alone, far from fragile things like cities, continents, or mortal minds."

"We always need more healers," Mercury sent me a smile, looking around as the plaza grew more and more packed. "Who else is here with you? I saw Glynda and Shishou."

"Scathach is getting a lay of the land, and Glynda is helping with evacuations. I already mentioned that Melina and Tsunade meet with the healers before the fight to grasp their specialties, and Yoruichi and Ranni are right there. Priscilla is watching the house, and Artoria, Diana, and Robin are occupied and won't be joining us. Raven is here too. You just don't notice her."

To prove my point, my shadow waived energetically at Beast Boy. The shapeshifter awkwardly raised a hand and waived back.

"This will never not be weird," the hero muttered under his breath as my shadow saluted smartly and became inanimate again. "I mean, it's one thing to see two versions of Wonder Woman, ya know? But a second Raven? With a bunch of different personalities? That became a Demon Lord? That's married!? Should I congratulate you, or have you admitted to an Asylum?"

"Yes."

“I know what you mean,” Mercury continued to watch my shadow like a hawk even as it remained inanimate. “I can somehow understand the demon lord part. I’ve heard of weirder heroes. And the multiple personalities make perfect sense for Raven. She always did seem to have a lot going on upstairs, if you know what I mean. But married? Happily? It’s freaky.”

“You know that is my wife you are talking about, right? And that she can hear you?”

“It’s not a bad thing or an insult,” Beast Boy frantically waved his hands in denial. “It’s just… not something we expected, ya know? Takes some getting used to.”

“Fair enough,” I chuckled, not bothering to continue to scare them for my amusement. “Where are the rest of your teammates, by the way? Are they not coming?”

“They’re around,” Mercury nodded towards where the X-men were grouped together, the White Queen among them. X-23 was talking to Wolverine, the pair shooting the occasional glance our way. “The others are somewhere around here too. I know Winman is with Armsmaster, but I don’t know about the rest.”

“Eh, they’ll turn up,” I shrugged philosophically. “How are you two doing, by the way? After Trigon and everything?” Mercury’s body rippled, shifting this way and that as she looked anywhere but at me.

“Fine,” she said simply.

“We’re hanging in there,” Beast Boy grinned a shaky smile when he saw me raise an eyebrow, unconvinced by the mutant’s excited and detailed defence of her mental state. “It sucked. Big time. Taken out like chumps by some demon frat boys, then all the… all the rest. It sucked. But we got through it. We’re all here. Life moves on, ya know?”

I raised my second eyebrow, mildly impressed at the young man. It didn’t seem like he was putting on a facade or just saying that to appear cool. For all intents and purposes, the green shapeshifter was taking the events of Oct 30th with a stoic maturity I hadn’t expected.

“That’s good to know. Glynda also tells me you all have been doing remarkably well in the recovery, but it’s good to see it for myself,” I grinned, an idea forming. “Still, I feel a little responsible for the whole thing. You know, for not telling you all about the looming apocalypse and all that. You’ve all handled everything very well.”

“Nah, it’s cool,” Beast Boy waved a hand casually, cheeks flushing slightly. “An apocalypse is like a holiday, like Easter, Hanuka, or Christmas in July. It’s just something to expect.”

“Still,” I chuckled lightly at his joke. “I feel I should make it up to you all. Tell you what, after we finish roasting marshmallows on Behemoth, I will start talks about setting up a music career for one of my wives, Priscilla. You can look her up on-”

“I know who she is, dude,” the shapeshifter interrupted me with a grin. “Me and Win watch her streams all the time! She’s great! So is she going to release an album? Concerts? What are we talking?”

“Uh,” I hesitated for an instant, put off a bit by his energy. Only for a moment, though, as this generally fit my plan. “So you wouldn’t say no to some tickets to her first concert?”

“That’d be awesome! When is it?”

“No idea,” I grinned. “We’re still in the early phase, and it’s not going to be a full tour or anything. She’s just starting out, but I’ll save you some tickets and let you know.”

“For all of us?” Mercury asked eagerly.

Both Beast Boy and I looked at her in surprise, and she was quick to defend herself.

“What? I might not be into games like you all, but she is really good,” she defended herself. “Starfire loves her too.”

“Not judging you,” I chuckled. “Just surprised you’ve even heard her before. She’s never left the Island. I’ll have to look into just how popular she’s become. Especially with fans like the Teen Titans.”

“I wouldn’t call myself a fan, per se,” Mercury idly fiddled with some of her liquid body, not looking me in the eye.

Both Beast Boy and I snorted a laugh.

I had been non-too subtly promoting Priscilla’s music for a while now but figured another point of influence wouldn’t go wrong. By all accounts, Beast Boy was one of the world’s most socially active and well-connected young heroes. His promoting my floof-dragon could only be a good thing.

And I hadn’t been lying about the responsibility for their condition.

I might be an asshole and an abomination from beyond time and space, but I had the barest form of empathy for people not in my Family.

It was a small, decrepit, shrivelled husk of a thing, but that empathy existed.

If you squinted real hard.

“What are you laughing about, dear?” Medea asked, walking up to us. She was bedecked for battle, her cloak covering her completely and staff in hand. Full Witch Mode, I liked to think of it as.

“Just reaffirming my faith in the one true religion,” Medea paused, hand already going to her temples as she prepared for my next spout of bullshit. I, naturally, couldn’t disappoint her. “Floof is love. Floof is life. We are born of the Floof, made men by the Floof, undone by the Floof. Soon the Floof will rule us all. Nobody can resist the dark lure of all that is Floofy.”

Beast Boy was nodding sagely along at my words while Mercury tilted her head in confusion.

Medea just sighed, letting her hand drop and staring at me in exasperation.

“You’re lucky you’re pretty.”

“I know.”

“And you spend way too much time with your cat.”

“Heresy! You can never have too much Medea time!”

The Greek Witch looked like she was about to argue but then stopped, realizing the verbal trap I had laid.

She sighed again.

I grinned. I never regretted having my cat named the same as my wife. Too much ammo to use.

Man, I love winning pointless, silly arguments like this.

“You all set up and good to go?” I asked, sparing her further annoyance like the gracious victor I was.

“As much as I can in this limited time,” Medea nodded. “I’m not limited on materials, thankfully, so I can spend extra in exchange for speed, but that only goes so far. If I had a week, I could have turned this city into a death trap. Maybe made the PRT headquarters, the Rig I heard it called, into a golem. For now, we must content ourselves with bounded fields, a few area traps, and only one teleportation field Scathach helped me with.”

“It should be more than enough for today,” I reassured her.

As mentioned, I had no intention of underestimating Behemoth, but I did not foresee too many problems with this many tools at our disposal.

“What’s a bounded field?” Mercury asked.

“It’s a topographical type of magecraft,” Medea started to explain, always happy to talk magic, so long as it didn’t delve into the secrets of her craft. “A sort of barrier that donates separate spaces. Boundaries have always had mystical properties, and with magecraft, we can exert rules over that-”

“You know how hot I find it when you talk magic,” I interrupted my wife with a kiss that sent her hood back. She flushed red all the way to her pointed ears, which started wriggling in joy as she glared at me in embarrassment. “But it looks like it’s starting.”

I nodded to where Superman was floating in the plaza’s center, gesturing for people’s attention. Dr. Strange was there as a representative of the magic users, Captain America for the PRT, and Eidolon as the offensive team leader.

We, naturally, joined the rest of the crowd in giving big blue our attention.

“Thank everyone for coming,” the Man of Tomorrow started as everyone quieted

down, his face set in a line of grim determination. “Most of you have been with us before, but I will review the basics for those new. Behemoth is on its way to this city, and we aim to stop it as soon as possible. Even as we speak, evacuations are ongoing, but this city has millions of people. We cannot get them all in time. Minimizing casualties is our absolute priority, whether from civilians or our comrades. Everything else comes second. Limiting collateral damage is our secondary objective but should not be put above saving lives. Cities can and have been rebuilt. The dead will not return.”

There were some cheers and voices of agreement, but more than a few eyes turned my way. I wonder if Superman intended to throw shade on me? Maybe to try and guilt trip me?

It wouldn’t work.

I ignored all gazes, fully intent on never bringing anyone back to life.

“To do that,” he continued. “You have all been divided into either Combat or Support, depending on your abilities. You can find your roll assignment, as well as placement, on your bracelet.” He held up his wrists where the sci-fi-looking bracelets fit snugly. “These were created by Dragon, Mr. Fantastic, and Iron Man. They act not only as communication devices but also trackers, vital monitors, and IDs. At any point during the battle, you may press the buttons at the base of your palm three times quickly to request immediate rescue or aid. For this battle, Movers will be ready to bring you to the medical tent, so long as the area you are in is not under active threat.”

I seriously wondered if Mr. Fantastic, Reed Richards, had a hand in these devices. It wasn’t impossible his daughter was making a bunch of stuff under his name. The ‘Reed’ at the gala had been a robot of some sort and not one with sentience. As soon as I shook its hand, I immediately noticed the lack of ‘life’ in it, something that didn’t happen with dealing with AIs, cyborgs, or other lifeforms that could think for themselves.

The question was, what had happened to the original?

Dead? Incapacitated? Detained? Or was he doing something important enough to send his super smart yet unpowered daughter to meet me with only a robot as a bodyguard?

“…kill radius of fifty meters. Anyone without a brute rating or special ability to survive changes in temperature or radiation must remain far away.” Superman continued to brief the heroes even as I tuned him out. “For safety’s sake, we recommend over seventy-five meters of distance at all times. In case it moves your direction or escalates. Our thinkers have noted the Endbringers are slowly ramping up their power usage every attack.”

“Why?” Some unknown hero I couldn’t see called out from the crowd.

“We don’t know,” Eidolon answered, floating beside the Man of Steel. “Even now,

after six years, there is so much we are unaware of regarding the Endbringers. I will lead the attackers, while Superman will lead the rescue efforts. We will report any changes in power usage or behaviour we note, so keep your communicators at hand at all times."

I, again, idly wondered if I should kill Luthor. Eidolon was a power projection, so staging an accident for the green hero would be pointless.

I decided to not do so for the same reason as I hadn't before.

A whole bunch of reasons that boiled down to two essential points.

One, I couldn't be sure he was responsible for the Endbringers. In the book, his shard worked by providing the man with what he 'needed.' Either as a power or as a worthy enemy. The Endbringers had always existed, the Entities using the conflict engines in all their worlds. All Eidolon had done was make them more powerful, shape them to conform to human myths, and unconsciously direct them to places to shake the status quo.

The braindead Entities might have done the same in this world on instinct in response to more powerful defenders.

The second point was, once again, even Luthor was responsible for the Endbringers, I wasn't afraid. Cautious, of course, but not scared.

They were Doomsday equivalents, not Trigon level.

I could take them.

"…indicate it is approaching from the northwest," Superman continued. "Behemoth's standard pattern is to emerge between three to five miles from the city and cover the rest of the distance above the ground. We managed to drive it off the last five times before it reached the city's center. So long as we are cautious, today will be no different."

"It will be different!" Someone shouted from above the crowd. I looked over to see Glory Girl pumping her fist in the air, Panacea hovering beside her with her face in her hands. "We're gonna kill the big rock!"

"Yeah!"

"Kill it!"

"No more driving it back! Behemoth dies today!"

"Kill it!"

"Destroy Behemoth!"

More and more heroes began to clamour, cheer, yell, and hype themselves up for the fight. None seemed more excited than Glory Girl, who was leading a chant. Even Superman smiled, the grim mood of only a few minutes ago shattered by the excitement and cheers.

"She knows how to get them excited if nothing else," Medea whispered to me.

"Kill it!"

“Kill it!”

“Kill it!”

“Kill it, Elden Lord!”

“Cheerleaders,” I shook my head in amusement. “Hot blond cheerleaders. Never should their powers be used for evil.”

“Kill it, Elden Lord!”

“Kill it, Elden Lord!”

“Kill it, Elden Lord!”

“Elden Lord!”

“Elden Lord!”

“Elden Lord!”

“Like that,” Medea asked with a laugh as all eyes, over a hundred pairs, focused on me.

Glory Girl gave me an encouraging look like she was helping me.

I wanted to facepalm but had to settle with a commiserating look with Panacea.

Fucking extroverts.

“You got this, boss!” Glory Girl cheered, giving me an enthusiastic thumbs up.

“Fine, fine,” I sighed with a smile.

I was totally getting her back for this later.

The crowd cheered as I walked to the plaza’s center, joining Superman, Eidolon, Captain America, and Dr. Strange. With Batman in the command center, these five were the figureheads of this fight. I side-eyed the last, wondering what was happening in the Sorcerer Supreme’s mind. He had to know I wasn’t going to keep secret what I knew about Endbringers.

What was he going to do?

The premier magical user on the planet simply gave me a nod of acknowledgement. Not the friendly smile and handshake of Superman or Captain America, but better than Eidolon’s complete lack of reaction. I watched them all out of the side of my eyes as I turned to face the crowd.

“As much as I wish for a double kill,” I said, smiling at the costumed people the watched my every move. “I’m playing support. So no, I will not be killing Behemoth today.”

“Boo!” Glory Girl shouted with a thumbs down, though the gesture was playful.

“I don’t think the residents of Brockton Bay want another giant monster rampaging around, do they?” I joked rhetorically, looking at the group of local protectorate members.

“It is appreciated,” Miss Militia deadpanned at me, getting some laughter from the

crowd.

I took the opportunity to look around, getting a good grasp of my audience before I continued. There were smiles, laughter, and good-natured jokes, but it was all tinged with hesitation. Smiles didn't reach eyes. Laughter had a nervous edge to it, and jokes were morbid and dark.

These were heroes putting up a brave front for their comrades. For the people they defended. For their families at home.

Nobody had to be here. These were all volunteers, risking their lives to just hold off a monster for a bit more time, knowing that another would be coming in three months, whether they lived or died.

And they would die.

One in ten casualties might be nothing compared to the book, but it was still a large number of heroes. Heroes these people knew, loved, laughed, and fought with. Everyone here was a comrade in arms, and every loss was felt.

My throat suddenly felt extremely dry.

My Family might not fear the Endbringers, but we were the only ones.

Everyone else was terrified.

Yet they were here.

If I was them, I wouldn't be here. I would be home with my loved ones, watching others fight and die for me.

They didn't chant my name because they worshiped, admired, or even liked me. They chanted my name because, to them, I was a hero in the most important sense. I did the one thing heroes were supposed to do.

I gave them hope.

Hope they desperately needed.

Hope that tomorrow will be better than today.

Hope that one day, they wouldn't live in a world where they needed to risk their lives four times a year to barely stave off monsters that would never die.

I could never be a hero.

I was too flawed, too selfish, too cowardly and egotistical.

But I admired heroes.

And these men and women, many of whom would die within the hour, were heroes.

"I will be straight with you all," I told the heroes. They quieted down as they noticed the smile gone from my face. "I can kill the Endbringers. All of them. All it would take is massive, cataclysmic damage to your planet. I don't want that. You don't want that. So, instead, I am going to do the second-best thing. I will give you all the tools you need to

kill them yourself. Knowledge."

Know yourself and know your enemy, and you shall never fear a hundred battles.

Everyone feared the unknown.

The best way to combat fear was not with hope, no matter how much sappy media would have us believe. The best way to fight fear was with knowledge. I had told Hippolyta something similar earlier today.

It is ignorance, not lack of skills, that kills people.

In Dark Souls terms, if you know the boss' patterns, elemental weaknesses, and arena, you can beat it even if you are level one, naked, armed only with a stick, and playing on a banana.

Anyone who has ever played one of their games knows that it is only the first playthrough that is really hard. Even if you play new game plus modes, where enemies hit harder and are tougher, it is easier because you know more about fighting them.

What I was going to do was give these heroes what they needed.

A walkthrough.

"All Endbringers have exactly two weaknesses," I explained to the enraptured crowd. "The first is how you drive them off. Energy usage. They are incredibly powerful beings with abilities that exceed almost any Super in capacity and variety. But it all takes energy. Any damage to their body takes energy to heal. Any attack they launch takes energy that can be spent healing. They cannot exceed their energy limits even using their full powers. The key to driving them off before they accomplish their goal is making the energy requirements too much for success to be worth further expenditure."

I rarely see it elaborated on in fanfiction or other discussions on Endbringers. Yes, their physical bodies outside their cores were like clothes, but repairing clothes takes material and energy. And that energy wasn't limitless. You can tire Endbringers out and wear them down to the point where they can barely attack or heal. It was what happened to the original Behemoth.

It was also why they waited months between attacks. All damage had to be repaired, and energy recuperated while they remained inactive. Otherwise, they would be destroyed by simple attrition.

So they hid and rested to recover their prodigious energy reserves.

"However," I continued. "Their energy levels border on the absurd. It takes a lot of power to move such materially dense bodies and use absurd powers, but they have the energy to spare."

I didn't know how much exactly. That was never mentioned in the book, and I didn't trust fanon for any numbers. I estimated that each Endbringer qualified as a Type 1

civilization on the Kardashev scale. Exhausting them was possible since they were energy guzzlers but inefficient.

"Instead of driving them off, it is better to kill them. Quickly. All Endbringers have a core. A central body protected by layers of superdense material that make up the body we all see. Destroy that core, and you destroy the monster, no matter how little damage it has sustained up until that point."

I kept my eye half on Strange, wondering if he would try and stop me from talking, but he did nothing. In fact, he was watching me like everyone else, with interest and realization on his face.

I would need to talk to him later.

"So, how do we kill Behemoth?" Supergirl asked from the crowd.

"We destroy the core," I answered simply. "We can either damage it enough that the location is revealed or use attacks that bypass the layers of material separating it from us. The latter is better, as it requires less time, but it also means we need to know where it is. The priority of anyone with any Thinker ability, scrying or tracking technique, or magic should be locating it. Start around the shoulder area. I believe that is where it is located, but I cannot confirm that."

"How do we destroy the core?" Glory Girl asked.

"If it's exposed? Sufficient force should do it. Nothing energy related except magic should be used, as Endbringers will go all out if they think their lives are in danger. By that very notion, expect it to go absolutely nuts when it realizes it's in danger. And if it realizes it is about to die, expect it to go out with a bang. Literally. Anyone near it must be able to survive a nuke if they want to live."

There was a general muttering, unrest spreading among the crowd as they listened to me. I saw many frowns, looks of confusion, and even some glares sent my way.

"But how do we kill Behemoth," one Chinese hero asked impatiently.

"Find the core, then hit it real hard, then prepare to run," I boiled it down to its most basic level.

"I can do that," Glory Girl said with a grin, punching one of her fists into the other. She was one of only a few still smiling.

"How?" Iron Man asked impatiently. "How do we do it?"

"Find the core?" I asked, wondering where the problem was. "Magic will be our best bet. Medea, can you set something up?"

"It will take a bit of time," she answered from her place among the crowd. "If someone can get me a sample of its body, I could probably do it in five minutes."

"There you go," I shrugged. "Hit a chunk off, pass it to Medea, delay, then boom."

“Are you going to tell us or not?” Someone yelled from the crowd.

“Tell you what?” I asked, getting annoyed now.

Just because I respected their heroism didn’t mean I would put up with bullshit. I had a very low tolerance for stupid people. Behemoth was like five minutes away. I didn’t think people here were dumb, they wouldn’t have survived this long if they were, and they might not have the context I have thanks to reading Worm, but I had been keeping things as simple as possible.

I kept things vague because any plan that was too specific would not survive the first five minutes. Not with so many moving pieces, different heroes, or abilities firing off in such quick succession.

My Family had plans, sure, but ideally we would never need them. Not with this many other combatants.

‘Something’s wrong,’ Emma said in my mind. I tensed, waiting for her to explain, but Iron Man got there first.

“Are you going to tell us how you killed the Simurgh or not,” he asked, frustration clear in his voice. “We are running out of time.”

“What,” I asked, bewildered for a second before the pieces clicked together as Emma spoke in my mind.

‘They hear your words, but when you stop talking, they forget everything about a ‘core’ or weaknesses. They’re being mastered somehow.’

Even as Emma explained what she saw in everyone’s minds, I was lunging at Stephen Strange.

The Sorcerer Supreme tried to step back, clearly taken by surprise by my action and other heroes tensed, some ready to defend or attack.

I wasn’t trying to hurt the man, though.

“Do you remember our conversation at your house,” I asked urgently, my hand on his shoulder and ‘freeing’ him from influence. “About Endbringers and cores?”

“What? Of course, I do,” he answered, shifting to try and release my hold on him. I held tight. “Unhand me!”

“And did you tell anyone?”

“I told everyone,” Strange answered, brows furrowed in confusion. “The League, PRT, the UN, everyone. Everyone should know how to kill the Endbringers. They are everyone’s enemy.”

I let him go.

I watched him closely, especially in the eyes.

They didn’t go unfocused, blur, or shift oddly. They didn’t even change the emotions

contained within. Even as I stopped 'freeing' him, he looked just as annoyed and confused as before.

"How do we kill Behemoth?" I asked, hoping and dreading the answer.

"You have not told us yet," the Sorcerer Supreme answered with the same disgruntled tone as he had asked me to unhand him.

'Nothing. As soon as you let him go, his mind filled in every word about Endbringers with empty filler.'

'They're not being mastered,' I responded mentally, puzzle pieces clicking together. 'It's a stranger effect. A large one. One that is off most of the time but activates whenever an Endbringer attacks.'

'If it was psychic, I would have felt it,' Emma defended. 'It wouldn't have worked thanks to the Defences, but I would have felt it.'

The crowd was becoming actively angry now.

Many were prepared to attack me or defend themselves even after I let Strange go. I saw Beast Boy look at me, confused and hurt on his face. Like I was betraying them somehow. I had no idea what they had heard until now. Maybe their minds were conjuring reasons to attack me.

'I know,' I answered, already guessing what was happening. 'It's also not magic-based, or Strange would not have been affected after I cleared it the first time. He would have put up defences.'

A pit formed in my stomach, a void of fear I did not expect to feel today.

Everyone feared the unknown.

Especially me.

'There's a second Enbringer active right now. One we've never heard about.'

That was when my communication bracelet started ringing.

******

Within the command center, Batman listened to Superman cover the basics of fighting Behemoth while he kept an eye on the instruments keeping track of the monster. The dynakinetic was, thankfully, slower than its water-based brethren giving more time to prepare and evacuate.

Today was going to be the day that Behemoth died.

If only the Elden Lord had told them how he had killed the Simurgh, he would have had preparations made instead of relying on the Dragon.

Batman turned his full attention to Mikael as he stood before the crowd. He looked

like he was taking this seriously. Good. The caped crusader also noted that releasing Glory Girl and Panacea from M/S confinement was a good move. Depending on how they performed today, they should be able to be released with only minimal surveillance.

It had been a month since the Dallon's revival. A good baseline had been formed from observation.

Batman listened to the Elden Lord speak about the Endbringers with a furrowed brow.

Why hadn't he said all this before? It wasn't like he was trying to keep it a secret if he was talking now? Was he just trying to come in at the last second to play the hero? Is that what he did with Trigon?

Why else would he be keeping how to kill the Endbringers a secret?

Something didn't add up.

The psychological profile of the Elden Lord Batman had built told him that the Dragon was an egoist, but one that avoided the spotlight unless it benefited him. For him to stand before a crowd of hundreds of heroes and babble nonsense without making a single pun or joke did not fit Mikael at all.

Batman listened to the Elden Lord speak about finding a 'core' to Glory Girl, a wondered why he had not explained things before? A quick search through his database showed no information about one at all. Not even any theories.

What was he doing searching his database? He should be tracking Behemoth.

Batman made to close the window and pull up the seismic data once more when his screen, for the barest of moments, fuzzed slightly on the edges.

Now, Batman was a paranoid man.

Extremely so.

When he discovered that the Simurgh was still lightly active even when floating in space, engineering failures in space travel, he did everything he could to ensure his information remained as secure as possible. Lacking information on the exact nature of Endbringers, he had gone all out to prepare a secure computer network.

With Parker's help and using the Clairvoyant as a basis, they had completed a data server that was not only quantum based but existed at multiple places and times at once, but self-correcting by sending information backwards and forwards through time and cross-referencing the result.

Any discrepancy would be automatically corrected using both backups.

By keeping the verification to a fraction of a picosecond, they could severely lower the energy costs and ensure all their data was safe from anyone without their clearance.

But this was not the Simurgh.

This was something else.

A stranger effect so strong that it covered the whole world, bypassed the defences of the strongest of magicians and psychics, to directly interfere with the brains of people. Its effect on computers was not any lesser. No sooner had a backup restored the Bat-computer to its proper operation, knowledge of cores and all, than did the effect erase that information once more.

A vicious cycle was playing out too fast for the eye to track.

To an outside observer, it would look like nothing. A bit of screen distortion could have any number of causes.

But he wasn't any ordinary outside observer.

He was the goddamn Batman!

With a Thinker rating of 9, even without superpowers, Bruce Wayne was easily within the top five most intelligent beings on the planet.

He only had clarity for a few seconds while the Elden Lord talked to the Sorcerer Supreme about the cores.

But it was enough.

Batman stared at the note in his hand in confusion.

'WTWBWM. Elden Lord.'

Batman knew what it meant. He had devised the code, after all. It was even written in his handwriting.

It was a simple one but designed to be as tricky as they come. Complicated codes were easy to break, and each new addition was a point of weakness. And this one was even easier than most.

Wayne Thomas. Wayne Bruce. Wayne Martha.

Simple initials of three people. But depending on their arrangement, they meant different things.

If first names came before last names, he was being coerced or mastered to write the code.

If his name was first, it meant he was compromised and should immediately seek either confinement.

If his mother's name was written first and his put last, he needed to immediately have Alfred or Dick enact Knightfall Protocol.

There were a bunch of other combinations of those six letters, all meaning different things, but this one was more serious than most.

Father's name, his, then his mother's.

Stranger affect. No defence. Entrust others.

Then Elden Lord.

For a second, just a second, Batman watched the Elden Lord.

Why had he written this note?

Why the Elden Lord?

What was he supposed to entrust to this being, this monster that could destroy the world?

Could he trust this man who clearly had other plans, intentions he wasn't aware of?

For a second, Batman doubted his own code.

"It wasn't your fault," a sturdy, reliable voice echoed in his ears as a fatherly hand gently ruffled his hair. The hand was cold but felt warmer than the cool alley air. "We would never blame you, Bruce. We are so proud of you. Of the man you've become. You're a hero, Bruce."

It ached.

His heart, his mind, his body.

Everything ached.

"No matter what happens," a warm voice said in his ear as arms pulled him tight to a chest that filled him with aching familiarity. "Always remember. We love you. No matter what. We love you, Bruce."

It was a good kind of ache.

Before Batman could second guess himself any further, he sent off the message.

He would trust Mikael.

Just this once.

But why had he done that?

Within the command center, Batman sat with a frown.

How had the Elden Lord gotten that code to tell Superman?

******

'Tell Superman. Omega. Alpha. Capricorn. Devil. End. 479863.'

"Tell us how to kill Behemoth," Strange urged. "Quickly. It is almost here."

"Omega. Alpha. Capricorn. Devil. End. 479863." I absently read out, my mind racing a mile a minute as I tried to devise a plan. If the Bat wanted to communicate with the boy scout, he should have messaged him directly.

I didn't have time to play messenger.

My stomach was a ball of icy fear.

I absolutely despised working with faulty information but having no information at all was much worse. A big part of me just wanted to grab my Family and return to my Island, where it was safe, but I knew that would be a major overaction.

I still thought we could take on Behemoth with little issue. A new Endbringer would be a problem, but not an insurmountable one with the full force of my Family.

Dealing with both while fending off the hostility of the gathered heroes?

That would be impossible.

It would be a confusing melee, with nobody certain who was an enemy and who was an ally. That needed to be avoided at all costs.

I had to do damage control and explain why I could not tell people how to kill the Endbringers while still getting them to trust my orders and directions.

And I had to do it quick.

If they attacked me or mine, I would leave them to their fate. My admiration for heroes did not go so far that I would martyr myself for them. They could deal with Behemoth on their own.

"Everyone listen-"

"Everyone! Listen to the Elden Lord!"

My words caught in my throat as I went to explain myself, only to be interrupted by Superman.

"Why?" Iron Man asked, looking non-plussed. "He's not telling us something!"

"That doesn't matter," Superman insisted. "When you all agreed to fight the Endbringers, you agreed to follow the Justice League's orders over those of your countries and organizations. As the field leader of the Justice League, I am ordering you all to follow the Elden Lord's commands! We are out of time. Will you listen, or will you leave?"

I had never seen Superman so serious. He had a look in his eyes as if daring anyone to contradict him. I was sure the first to do so would find themselves flown miles away in the blink of an eye and unable to return.

I blinked in surprise and shared a look of confusion with Medea. What was going on here? What sort of code had Batman sent me? That had to be the reason for Superman's behaviour. Had he shaken off the stranger effect?

Over a hundred heroes looked between me and the Man of Steel, confusion, anger, and fear in their eyes.

Then someone stepped forward.

"Not once have you led us wrong," Captain America told the Kryptonian as he gave him a pat on the back. "I will entrust our hopes to you once more. The Protectorate will follow the Elden Lord's orders."

With the two moral pillars of the superhero community stepping up, the rest fell like dominoes.

"The Guild will follow the Justice League," Dragon's drone said.

“The Yangban will follow, though we do so under protest.”

“The X-men are here!”

“The Winter Guard will fight!”

Before any more could step forward, I interrupted.

We didn’t have time for this.

“Enough!” I ordered, using magic to enhance my voice. “Nothing has changed. Prepare to fight Behemoth as before. Leave killing it to my Family. In my absence, you are to follow all their orders. Your goal remains the same. Save this city. Save lives. We will take care of the rest. So go!”

With so little time to formulate a plan, it was better to entrust them to do what they did best. Even if I could think of one that would guarantee Behemoth’s quick death, without practice or easy coordination between hundreds of people, I did not trust these heroes that I had met for the first time today to do as they were told.

Superman’s and Batman’s aid had avoided the worst possible outcome, but I still would have to do work if I wanted to win today.

‘Emma! Connect us all,’ I ordered mentally.

‘What is going on?’ Tsunade asked as soon as she joined our mental chatroom. She and Melina had been in the healer area and had not heard the talk in the plaza.

‘The situation has become most complicated,’ Ranni answered. “Though, I admit, I fail to grasp the particulars.’

As we talked, the heroes were breaking into their assigned positions. A few shot us suspicious looks, as we hadn’t moved, but a look from Superman sent them packing.

‘I found out how the Endbringers have survived so long,’ I answered grimly. ‘Whenever one attacks, they have another playing defence. One I have never heard of before. Like the Simurgh, but instead of using Master powers, it uses Stranger ones. It not only prevents people from realizing their weaknesses or that they can be killed, but I am willing to bet it has other abilities. Possibly spacial or temporal, likely the latter. It would explain how they keep coming back after seemingly being destroyed. A hidden Endbringer is pressing rewind. But that is just a theory, be ready to throw it out as soon as we know more.’

‘Weren’t you just talking about how energy intensive these things are,’ Yoruichi asked. ‘If you are right, it means this thing has been here for every fight. That doesn’t give it a lot of time to recharge.’

‘If it never gets hurt, then it wouldn’t need to recharge as much as the others,’ Medea theorized. ‘Healing, or in this case recreating matter, would be much more energy intensive than regular usage.’

‘Where is it?’ Scathach asked, eager for the fight.

‘It can be literally anywhere,’ I answered. ‘Its grasp has to be worldwide. Otherwise, people in foreign countries watching the fights would have noticed the discrepancies through tv or the internet. Its effect must be technopathic as well. It can be underwater, underground, or anywhere at all. Fuck, large or small, it can look like pretty much anything. We have no way of knowing what it looks like.’

‘Can we not ignore it?’ Melina asked. ‘Simply defeat the Behemoth and leave the other for later?’

‘It is unwise to leave our backs exposed to an enemy we are aware of,’ Scathach chided.

‘And we have no idea of its capabilities,’ Yoruichi continued. ‘We might be immune to its stranger effect, but who knows what else it can do?’

‘That’s how we’ll find it!’ I said as I had an idea. ‘We are immune thanks to the Defences. And all other Endbringer are obviously inhuman, no matter their size. Ranni! By my Command Seal! Expand your order upon the world!’

The blue moon in the sky brightened, illuminating the twilight in its chill glow. The gold loops of the Elden Ring shone as if in a noonday sun. One of six Command Spells faded from my chest with a red glow.

‘My Lord Husband?’

‘With that much power, you should be able to deploy thousands of dolls,’ I explained. ‘Have them search the world over. You do not need to fight. Just look.’ I readied my second command seal. ‘Emma! By my Command Seal! Encompass the world with your power!’

‘Mikael!’ The mutant complained at the sudden increase in her abilities. It was like a supercharged Cerebro. ‘This is going to give me such a headache.’

‘Sorry, but same deal,’ I continued, the plan falling out before me. ‘Just look. Limit yourself to Ranni’s vision and compare it to one or two people around the dolls. Wherever they don’t line up is where it is! Yoruichi, you’re going to be the first responder. The priority is to hit it hard and fast. If it is away from people, great. We’ll blast it. If not, our goal will be to separate it from civilization as quickly as possible. I do not want to give this thing time to respond once we find it.’

‘We’ll deal with Behemoth until then,’ Medea nodded along.

‘Exactly, we need-’

‘Mikael!’

‘Artoria? Perfect timing,’ I didn’t even comment on the lack of ‘sir’ in my name. ‘We have a situation. We need-’

‘Leviathan is attacking Themyscria!’

“What!?” I asked aloud, not bothering to care about the remaining heroes. Superman gave me a surprised look, but I waved him off.

The ball of icy fear in my gut was as large as an iceberg.

‘I cannot reach Robin or Diana!’ Emma urgently reported.

‘They remained behind to help defend,’ Artoria explained quickly. ‘It has been launching waves at the Island for minutes now, and we could not reach you. I had to open a portal home.’

The iceberg melted into an inferno of rage.

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“Brace!” Diana yelled to the amazons as another tidal wave crashed upon the island’s shore. The dark night makes strange shapes of the waves, moonlight unable to shine through the dark clouds overhead.

The water crashed, torrential force smashing against a wall of enchanted shields and superpowered women. Defensive enchantments, long woven around the small city, blinked in and out of existence as the Amazonian sorceress tried to reinforce them with magic.

Everyone had retreated to high ground as the water level rose, wary of being dragged out to sea by a rip tide. Now, the hundred-odd amazons stood atop a peninsula overlooking their ruined home. The same one that Hippolyta had shown Mikael earlier that day.

“By Hera,” Diana heard someone mutter as houses and buildings washed away, stone crushed under the force of the water. But she didn’t have time for any of that.

“Any luck?”

“He’s fast,” Robin answered, face scrunched up in concentration with her closed eyes and arms crossed over her chest. Diana had not seen her need to use that trick in almost a year. Not since she had ascended to Tier 7. “Extremely fast. Not only moving but destroying my eyes as soon as they form. So long as he remains underwater, I cannot lock down a location.”

“If we could drag the beast from the ocean, we would,” Hippolyta growled, holding her shield above her head to protect herself from the rain.

The droplets fell like knives and would have shredded the common mortal like tofu. To the amazons, they were papercuts. Annoying and could kill if enough accumulated, but not immediately deadly.

For the island? They were catastrophic.

The rain had only fallen for the last few minutes, but all vegetation on the island had been destroyed. Torn to shreds and washed away in the mud. Stone shattered. Trees splintered. Houses crumbled. The island paradise that Mikael had visited only a few hours ago was now an almost bare rock adrift in the Mediterranean Sea.

Diana inwardly wept for the loss of another home.

And in only five minutes.

Without even catching sight of their enemy.

They wouldn't know what was attacking them if it wasn't for Robin.

"We must hope Artoria returns soon," Diana told the Queen, trying to bolster her spirits. She did not look pleased, to say the least.

Five minutes.

Nobody had died yet, a testament to the training and abilities the amazons of this world were blessed with, but in only five minutes, Leviathan had torn down what her people had built throughout millennia.

If Diana was distraught, she could only imagine this version of her mother was much worse.

There would be a reckoning, of that it was inevitable.

"Artoria is not coming," a voice intruded on their conversation. A male voice. A welcome one.

"Mikael!" Robin greeted cheerfully, though her eyes remained closed, and she focused on locating the Endbringer in the ocean.

"How did you get here?" Hippolyta asked Mikael as he casually strolled up to the battered amazons, a shield of shimmering blue magic protecting him and Scathach from the rain.

Apart from the Celt, he was alone.

"I told you earlier today, there is nowhere I cannot go," he answered simply. Diana saw his eyes flit to her and Robin, give them a once over to check for injuries and return to meeting Hippolyta's eyes. "Now tell me, *Bird*," he practically snarled the last word, and to a one, every Amazon recoiled. "What song are you to sing this time?"

Robin and Diana shared a concerned look, but Scathach seemed unsurprised. She simply watched the amazons like a hawk.

"What?" Hippolyta asked, looking visibly confused but not backing down from his intense gaze. "Explain yourself! Are you here to aid us, or shall I take your invasion as a violation of your word?"

For a tense moment, Diana feared her husband would attack the Queen, his draconic eyes glowing with power and rage.

Then he laughed.

It was not a good laugh.

It was not the laugh she made when he shared a terrible pun with Robin. It was not the laugh of delight he had when rubbing Medea or Priscilla's fur. It wasn't even the petty laughter he got when planning a prank.

This laugh was deep, bubbling up from his chest and rumbling like falling boulders on a cliff.

Dark.

Malicious.

It was a laugh full of sadistic delight.

Diana, unaffected by the cold and the wet, felt herself shiver.

"You have not realized it yet, Birdy," Mikael laughed, clapping with delight. "They did not tell you, did they? But why would they? You are just a *pet*."

The last word dripped with such condescension, derision, and disgust that Hippolyta recoiled as if slapped. Something must have clicked for her as she looked at the man with horrified realization.

Others, however, were not so well informed.

"I will not allow you to speak of my mother in such a way," Wonder Woman said, stepping in front of the woman and glaring at Mikael. The man just looked, if at all possible, even more amused. "Either explain yourself or leave. Now is not the time for squabbles."

As if to prove her point, the water line started receding again, and another tidal wave gathered in the distance. Larger than before, it covered the horizon and rose over twenty meters into the air.

Then it was gone.

Evaporated in a tide of fire and lightning that blinded the watchers, billowing forth like an ocean of its own from the ghostly heads of a former dragonlord.

"I told your mother this, and now I tell you," Mikael said as he dissipated Placidusax's Ruin, steam still wafting from the evaporated water. "I am above your weight class. And I am not here for Leviathan. Scathach is."

"Alone," Diana asked, worried. "Where is everyone else?"

This wasn't like Mikael at all. He was the type of man who would rather use excessive force than risk using too little.

"Occupied," he answered, giving her and Robin a severe look. "Between you three and the birds, you should be able to handle Leviathan, even if he is going all out."

Diana realized something then.

Not that Mikael was angry, that was obvious.

Mikael was determined.

Something had set him off, and he had drawn his line in the sand.

Mikael was showing that conviction she had so desperately hoped to see again.

Despite everything, the destruction of another home and the looming threat, Diana had to fight a smile.

This was the man she fell in love with.

“And you?” Hippolyta asked, her voice shaking as if dreading the answer. “What will you do? Leave?”

“Since I’ve been invited, leaving without greeting the house’s owners would be rude. They must have heard my knocking.”

It took Diana a moment to realize that Mikael was looking at somewhere specific as he spoke. She followed his gaze.

It stood, glowing a pale white in the dark night, white marble doors floating in the air. Framed by Corinthian columns and decorated in gold filigree depicting figures of myth, it was an image Diana had seen before.

Then the doors opened to a familiar helmet and armour.

“”””ARES!””” Diana, Wonder Woman, and Hippolyta shouted simultaneously, arms falling to their weapons. The other amazons reacted similarly, whirling from the water to face the god of war.

“I am not here for you,” he growled, his own weapon in hand as he faced the army of Themyscria. Then he turned, and Diana understood Mikael’s words. Horror gripped her. “Elden Lord. You are to appear before the council of Olympus. Come peacefully. Or don’t. I don’t care.”

“I’m so scared,” Mikael deadpanned before sending off a wink to Diana and a cheeky smile. Then he started walking towards the gates to Olympus. “Anyone ever tell you you look like an edgy teen? It’s the horns and spikes you see. Makes you look desperate. Screams daddy issues.”

“Your clothes appear as if someone has vomited a cornucopia upon cloth,” Ares snorted in derision. Mikael had clearly changed clothes at some point, returning to his floral print shirt and short combo. There was no way Ranni would have let him wander around with his chest exposed. “I am unimpressed.”

“Don’t knock it till you try it,” Mikael defended, flaring his open shirt like a cape. Three command seals glowed red in the night. “I killed a Demon Lord wearing this. I figured it was appropriate. Fashion Souls is the true endgame. Everyone knows that.”

Ares didn’t bother responding, just readying his sword as Mikael approached the door,

ready for an ambush or trick. The amazons, too, were tense even as another wave gathered far from the shore. Their eyes, however, remained on the god and the gate. Everyone was ready for an outbreak of violence.

There was none.

Mikael walked by the god of war without even blinking an eye.

“By the way,” he said, pausing one step from the open gate as if an idea just came to him. Diana did not buy it for a second. Mikael never did anything without at least three plans. “Was it your idea? Leviathan?”

“Sea brains,” Ares answered gruffly.

“I’m flattered,” Mikael chuckled lightly as if the answer was expected. “Really makes a guy feel special, you know. Sacrificing your last worshipers just to meet me. Gives me the tingles.”

Then he stepped through the portal to Olympus, followed quickly by the god of war.

The portal disappeared in seconds, leaving behind a people abandoned by their gods.

******

The stage was set.

The actors donned their costumes.

The supporting characters practiced their lines.

The props were in their places.

The monster approached, ready to do battle against the heroes of justice.

A tried and true story. Good vs. Evil. Monster vs. man.

But the lead actor left the stage.

The hero was gone, yet the monsters remained.

Even without our protagonist, the show must go on.

And so the curtain rises on a new world.

Author's Note:

Whoo boy, did this one get away from me. Not only did this cross the 10k mark, but I have been sick all week. I seriously considered releasing an omake and putting this one off for a week.

Ultimately, you all have waited long enough, so I pushed myself to get this out, even if I gave it fewer edits than usual, so I apologize if this one is a bit rough.

A slow intro followed by one gut punch after another. A culmination of dozens of little plot threads I have been weaving together since the start of Volume 2. I'm sure you all have a bunch of questions, some that will be answered and some that won't in the coming weeks. You will just have to wait and read.

I will see you all next week.

TRIBUNAL IV

Now here we stand with their blood on our hands
We fought so hard, now can we understand?
I'll break the seal of this curse if I possibly can
For freedom of every man
So far away, we wait for the day
For the lives, all so wasted and gone
We feel the pain of a lifetime lost in a thousand days
Through the fire and the flames, we carry on

'*Medea's in charge.'*

"Where did the Elden Lord go?" Superman asked, face set. Both Eidolon and Strange flanked him, all three looking none too pleased with her husband's disappearance.

She didn't blame them.

She was furious he needed to leave in the first place.

"He's fighting Leviathan," Medea lied, not letting her emotions show on her face. "He left me in charge. We're enough for Behemoth."

"Leviathan!?" They recoiled, Strange floating into the air and summoning a phantasmal image of the planet. A point in the northeast corner of the US glowed a pulsing red as it moved steadily toward Brockton Bay from underground. "I can't find it!"

Scrying, Medea recognized. A highly potent scrying spell locked onto the Endbringers. Probably using their dimensional fluctuations, knowing what she did about the Sorcerer Supreme's specialties and looking at this spell's components. This was why the heroes of this world had so much time to prepare compared to the book.

The Endbringers could not prevent magic.

'*This is a trap.' Mikael mentally said as soon as Artoria finshed talking. 'The Endbringers can't deal with magic. There's no way they can breach some of the greatest divine barriers in the world. Not without being let in.'*

Medea narrowed her eyes as she stared at the map.

Where was this 'Stranger' Endbringer?

Unless the mage was not as good as she expected? Or was Mikael wrong?

"Medea!" Eidolon shouted, shaking the Greek witch from her study of the spell. "Where is Leviathan!?"

"Attacking Themyscira," the witch answered, still puzzling over the new implications. "Mikael can do more good there. We need to kill Behemoth."

"How?" Eidolon urged, eyes also on the red dot on the magic globe as it approached

closer and closer. The scrying shifted, drawing closer to the one red dot on the globe and shifting to a three-dimensional view of the state and the earth below. The red dot climbed from below the ground at an angle toward Brockton Bay. “It’ll breach in less than a minute.”

“No time,” Medea snapped, shaking herself from her thoughts. Trying to explain the Stranger effect while they were still under it was a doomed project. “Just follow my orders, and we will kill two Endbringers today.”

Maybe three, if they could find this elusive Stranger.

‘I need to go.’

‘No, you don’t,’ Medea insisted. ‘These are gods! Let them and their people rot! Summon Robin and Diana! They can’t stop you.’

‘As much as I do enjoy a good fight,’ Scathach joined in. ‘Doing as your enemies intend is not a good strategy.’

‘I either go there, or we leave this world,’ Mikael replied grimly.

“Batman put the Elden Lord in charge,” Superman did not look pleased, but he was resolute. “If he trusted him, and Mikael trusts you, then we’ll listen for now. What do we need to do?”

“Get Behemoth to the bay.”

‘This is blackmail, plain and simple. I ignored them, and less than twenty-four hours later, my Family is under threat,’ Mikael explained. ‘If I don’t bite the bait, they will escalate. They will stop acting indirectly and start moving actively.’

‘It will be a war,’ Tsunade realized. ‘A guerrilla war.’

‘These are not common villains. These are gods. Half of us could beat most of them, and the other half? They would need escorts any time they were off the Island, to say nothing of collateral damage. We’d be living in fear. I refuse to put my Family through that when I can stop it. And I’m pissed.’

“I can’t do that,” Strange shook his head. “I’ve tried teleporting the Endbringers away in the past. Leviathan, I can manage if it’s careless, but Behemoth has avoided every one of my portals after the first time I sent it into space. The only way we can get it into the bay would be through the city.”

“You’re crazy if you think we are doing that,” Eidolon denied. “Most of the south and east are still being evacuated. It’s too dangerous.”

“He’s approaching from the northwest,” Superman remained calm, though his frown did deepen at what she was insinuating. “You’re asking us to let it rampage.”

“No,” Medea’s smirk was confident, well used to being doubted. She had prepared for this. “We just need to lead it to where the highway passes through the Trainyard. I’ve

turned those three blocks into a trap. As soon as it steps foot there, it will be teleported to the bay."

Behemoth could avoid Strange's spells because the Sorcerer Supreme essentially opened a door between two spaces. An incredibly cost-effective method of teleportation that was reliable and secure.

Medea didn't intend to give the monster a chance to avoid anything. She was going to teleport it directly.

It would normally be idiotic to teleport something so unbelievably dense, powerful, and massive as an Endbringer without an enormous amount of magical power.

Normally.

Mikael might not have boosted her with a command seal, but Medea was still, technically, a Servant. She could use her 'masters' mana so long as it wasn't more powerful than her Spirit Origin without issue. Combine that with all the materials she gathered from the Island's Phantasmal species and her Element?

Medea was sure she could do it.

She might not be as powerful as Artoria, Raven, Scathach, or Diana, but Medea had complete confidence she could take them all on with enough prep work.

Twenty minutes wasn't enough time for any of her best work, but it was enough to set up such a decisive move, especially since the Endbringers lacked the Magic Resistance that would stop such a simple yet effective plan.

'Let's all go,' Melina suggested.

'Nay,' Ranni disagreed. 'Should we all venture forth, we shall leave this city without true defenders. To the world, we hath just refused to give these warriors the methods of slaying the beast. We must leave enough behind enough of a force to lay the Endbringer low, lest we be vilified or castigated as cowards.'

'I'm only taking Scathach,' Mikael said simply. 'The rest of you are to remain here.'

'I shall also accompany you, Sir Bard,' Priscilla joined in. 'Mine Spirit Ashes hath recovered and are counters to the water beast.'

'No,' Mikael insisted. 'Just Scathach. I am expendable. So long as my main body remains, I can recreate my avatar as often as I want, though getting Amy to make another body will be annoying. If it does get down to a fight, and I lose, I can use my Command seals from the Island. I only have three left, so three of you are the most that can be on Themyscira. You shouldn't have any trouble with Leviathan between you, Robin, and Diana.'

'And the amazons?' Scathach asked.

'We'll see,' Mikael answered, simmering rage in his mental voice. 'Your priority is the safety of you three. Anything or anybody gets in the way of that, remove them.'

“Behemoth is five miles out!” Strange reported, eyes still on the scrying spell, as everyone’s cybernetic bracelets chimed a warning to the same effect. “We’re out of time!”

“He’ll breach any second,” Eidolon said, jetting off towards the northwest.

“How certain are you of this plan?” Superman asked, remaining behind but poised to leave the second someone needed rescuing. Just because Behemoth could imitate Kryptonite didn’t mean he wasn’t prepared to do his duty.

No matter the cost.

“Completely,” Medea answered, uncowed by the intense look in the Man of Steel’s eyes. The alien was impressive, but he was no Heracles. “Get him to the bay, and we win.”

For a tense moment, the shorter witch stared at the tall man flying in front of her. Medea might not be intimidated, but it would make life difficult if he ignored her instructions.

“Dragon,” Superman ordered into his communication device. “Order everyone to direct Behemoth to that location.”

“All fighters,” Dragon’s voice rang out from their bracelets. “Priority shifted from defence to leading Behemoth to the designated zone.” A holographic map appeared in front of them all, the mentioned street blocks lit red. “The area has already been evacuated. Safety remains a priority. Good luck.”

“Thank you,” Medea nodded, taking flight herself. The trap would work even without her present, but she wanted to be sure. Nothing could be left to chance when so much remained unknown.

Superman made to follow her but paused, tilting his head slightly as if listening to something only he could hear.

“It hasn’t breached yet,” he muttered to himself.

‘Mikael’s gone in,’ Emma reported. ‘I can’t connect to him anymore.’

‘To be honest, even if I wasn’t furious, I would need to go there,’ Mikael sighed, casting his teleportation spell. At this distance, he would need to use Ranni’s version, not Medea’s, which took more time to cast. ‘We need information. Desperately. Too many things are happening too quickly. Too many coincidences.’

‘What do you mean?’ Glynda asked.

‘Last night, we captured the Faery Queen,’ Emma answered instead. ‘Right after that, the gods try and forcefully teleport Mikael away. After that, he runs into Valeria Richards, accompanied by a fake Reed Richards. When she asks for help to “save the world.”’ They could all hear the air quotes in her voice. ‘Behemoth attacks the same place that is attacked by Leviathan in the book. Then Leviathan attacks an Island with our Family on it, the same Island controlled by the gods. That is a lot to happen in less than twenty-four hours.’

'We're being kept busy,' Yoruichi said. 'Distracted.'

'Let us not let paranoia create new foes. We had the trip the Themyscira planned for days,' Artoria pointed out.

'And my battle with Ciara was happenstance. A spur-of-the-moment decision. It could not have been planned for last night.'

'I know,' Mikael said grimly as he prepared to teleport. 'Still, ask her about gods. Or anything she can tell us at all about what has the Parlaments scared enough to be working together.'

'You're afraid one of them could be the 'Oppressor' she spoke of?' Medea asked.

'No. I'm afraid that they aren't.'

Medea's throat tightened, but she continued ascending.

They had known this would happen.

They had a plan.

The plan went wrong immediately.

"Dear god!" Strange gasped loudly, fear and disbelief in his voice, freezing Medea in mid-air.

She whirled, spell circles lighting the plaza a blazing purple.

The threat wasn't here.

On the ghostly globe, the red dot had shifted.

It was right below them.

'Medea's in charge.' Mikael said right before teleporting, his voice brokering no argument.

'Sir Mikael?'

'I trust you all to know what to do, but Medea has the final say. No exceptions.'

'Why me?' She couldn't help but ask, as befuddled as the rest. 'Artoria or Tsunade would make better commanders. Actually, Ranni or Emma would be better. They have overlooking view of the situation.'

'You are all grown women, intelligent and experienced. I trust everyone to do their best, to make sound judgement calls and not take unnecessary risks. But I trust Medea with what is most important to me. To both of us.'

Mikael looked at her in the eyes and bent down to give her the lightest of kisses.

"Your priority is this Family," he said aloud. "Everything else comes second. Make sure everyone gets home safe."

Then he was gone, leaving her with three confused heroes and an impending Endbringer attack.

"Everyone away!" Superman shouted, lunging back towards the plaza as fast as he could fly.

It was almost too late.

Behemoth burst from the plaza in a torrent of stone, heat, and death.

If those who remained in the plaza hadn't been the support team, most with mover ratings, everyone would have died.

Only those flying or who had fled as soon as Superman opened his mouth survived the first explosion, as everything within a hundred meters was bathed in nuclear fire.

To many, the warning came too late.

The lucky ones died quickly.

The unlucky ones lived for a while.

An enormous knarled limb of obsidian rock pulled the beast from the chthonian depts. Heat haze shimmered in the air, smoke choking the skies as the Endbringer rose in a waterfall of fire and stone. Behemoth towered over the burning city at nearly fifty feet tall, like a rocky fusion between a human and a bear. Grey skin rippled with rocky crags, jagged spikes and cooled lava, an enormous red 'eye' glowed amidst the flames set on something that looked more like an obsidian porcupine than anything resembling a face.

Around the monster, Brockton *burned*.

Electricity crackled around the beast, lances of energetic destruction that tore through buildings and people alike.

Superman carrying two young heroes in his arms, flew from the blast, fire singing his cape as his speed slowed, the kryptonite radiation weakening him quickly. Lightning speared at the fleeing trio, but Superman wasn't so weak yet that the electricity did anything more than cosmetic damage to his back.

"Behemoth at the plaza! Zone 4B," Dragon reported from the bracelets. "Kill range at seventy-seven metres. Safety distance increased to hundred and twenty metres or more."

"How!?" Strange shouted desperately, protected by enchantments and shields from the worst of the fire. "It's never been that fast! It was still miles away!"

Even as he talked, he was already in motion, casting spell after spell with a speed Medea would have appreciated if her mind wasn't in frantic conversation with Emma and Ranni.

'Moscow! Beijing! They're under attack!' Emma called to the group.

Medea rose higher and higher in the air, magic circles blasting down a Rain of Light at Behemoth.

Even as chunks of rocky flesh fell away, more heroes died as the Sorcerer Supreme's portals could not teleport them out fast enough. They burned from within, disintegrated by the heat kindled in their bodies.

'Villains? Endbringers? What is going on?' Artoria asked.

Medea didn't have time for this, her limited Observation Haki gave her enough warning to dodge a blast of lightning as she flew higher in the sky. Dozens, hundreds of magical purple circles covered the evening sky as the witch gave up any pretense of holding back.

Anybody who was near Behemoth was already dead anyway.

Her staff pointed at the beast, Rain of Light fell in a torrent of magical artillery blasts, decimating the area and Behemoth, carving further chunks the size of cars from the Endbringer's flesh.

The monster was not still. Tree trunk-sized arms raising to protect its body, it sent a tide of destruction toward the flying magicians. Beams of fire, lightning, and more unidentifiable forms of energy blasted skyward in an instant.

There was no delay between the launch of the attack and it lancing through where they had flown. The pair would have died without Haki or the protective enchantments alerting them beforehand.

'Another Endbringer is attacking Moscow!' Emma reported. 'The fat one!'

'Khonsu,' Medea said, dodging another lance of lightning. She was never so glad as now to have Haki, her C rank agility unable to keep up with the speed of the attacks without the forewarning.

Suddenly Eidolon was in the sky with her, his green cloak shimmering with a forcefield against the heat and radiation. A beam of energy lanced down at the Endbringer, dissipating into nothing as it approached.

"I don't know what happened," the hero reported as he shifted powers. Blades of folded space fell like guillotines, not dissipating as they approached the monstrous engine of destruction. "It was there, then it was gone."

Medea filed that away as she cast her spell.

Behemoth froze as Atlas anchored him in place, foot half raised to shift out of the way of Eidolon's attack. Grey blades carved through silicon flesh, a house-sized fist falling with an earth-shattering rumble.

'Two more have besieged the Chinese capitol.' Ranni continued. 'The tall one, 'Bohu', maketh the city a maze of death.'

'And Tohu?' Medea asked urgently.

'Nothing. It floats above its other, taking no action.'

Medea clenched her fist, frenetic energy sending her mind racing a mile a minute.

'Make sure everyone gets home safe.'

More and more grey blades fell upon the Endbringer as the Greek witch focused on keeping it in place, and Strange continued to teleport people away with the reprieve.

Though frozen, Behemoth was still able to send out more lighting, the sound deafening the ears as it shot skyward at the attackers or carved through buildings. Entire blocks of the city disappeared in tides of electricity, and anyone trying to hide or flee burned to death by the heat and the blast.

A spacial blade sliced off an arm. Another carved Behemoth's head in half. A third removed the jagged claws from its remaining fist. None of the wounds healed.

Despite everything, the surprise attack, the destruction of the city, the larger-than-normal output, and the short time of the attack, the combo of Medea's control magic and Eidolon's attacks were tearing through the monster.

They were winning.

Then Behemoth… *reset*.

One moment Eidolon's blades were tearing it to pieces. The next Behemoth was back in one piece, all separated body parts reattached, completely uninjured and free from Medea's spell exactly where it had breached the ground.

"It healed," Eidolon shouted, shifting his aim and switching powers.

Medea cast Atlas again, and again Behemoth froze. But this time it only remained bound for a heartbeat, violent energy rippling out from it in an explosion that covered its entire body in flames.

The explosion forced all three fliers higher in the sky, and the shockwave aborted attacks and rescue attempts.

The frenzied battle paused momentarily as they tried to reorient their senses through the haze and smoke.

Hundreds of meters below them, in a rubble-strewn circle ten blocks wide, Behemoth's red eye glared up at them, the monster completely uninjured.

Less than a minute had passed since it first burst from the ground, and already half of this district of the city was destroyed.

That was when the first attacking force of heroes reached the battle.

Blasters rained attacks on the Endbringer. Brutes or Shakers who could resist the heat and immolation launched themselves at the beast, pummeling it with fists and weapons.

Most did little to nothing.

Cyclops' beams curved and hit other heroes as Behemoth redirected their energy.

Starfire's bolts rained harmlessly on its rocky shell.

Green Lantern's constructs barely seemed to hamper the monster's rampage.

Iron Man's missiles fell like rain with no effect from the shockwave or heat. His plasma beams fell like rain but only had the effect of water droplets.

No sort of physical attack not backed by magic, where fist or blade did any damage as

the murder machine negated the kinetic force of their blows.

That wasn't to say nothing they did had any effect.

Iceman was instrumental in keeping the Endbringer occupied, the mutant working overtime to counteract the immense heat of the area.

Zatanna forced the monster into increasingly absurd situations with her magic, whether freezing it in place, transforming its attacks into rainbows, or altering its jagged spikes into mounds of flowers.

Eidolon continued to shave pieces off the monster with his grey blades of folded space-time.

It was Stephan Strange, however, that most impressed Medea now that he was freed from rescue duty by the arrival of the other heroes.

The Sorcerer Supreme lived up to his title.

He was everywhere. Dimensional clones refracted over the surface of reality, dozens of them filling the skies with blasts of magic, barriers deflecting and diffusing lightening, muting blasts of sound, or warping reality to hamper the Endbringer's movements.

Watching the battle below her, Medea could understand how these heroes had managed to stave off the Endbringers for so long. If this were a normal attack, they would probably be winning, driving the monster back with every second that passed.

But this was not a normal fight.

Strange cast a spell that ripped the beast's head from its shoulders.

Behemoth reset.

Eidolon shifted powers, transforming into a silhouette of multitudinous light that was painful to look at, and blasted his body through the monster's chest.

Behemoth reset.

With Iceman's aid, Myrddin separated a leg that sent the Endbringer toppling.

Behemoth reset.

Any time Endbringer accumulated significant damage, the monster would revert to its previous state. It wasn't healing, but making it as if the damage never happened at all. If it was trapped, banished or at a dead end, it would be repositioned to an earlier location.

It was like loading a save file in a game, completely undoing any progress made.

The heroes, however, acted as if it was healing and continued to tear into the monster over and over again, losing more and more comrades every second.

They were accomplishing nothing yet did not know it.

Behemoth, not needing to waste energy on regeneration, could spend its power on attacking.

Bolts of lighting turned a half dozen Brutes to ash.

A mighty leap brought a group of flyers within its expanded kill range, and they all turned to charcoal instantly.

Its massive body advanced, steady and unstoppable, deeper into Brockton Bay.

Medea watched it all from the sky, firing the occasional Rain of Light when she could as she tuned out the screams of the dying and the cacophony of sounds.

Too much was happening too quickly.

She needed to think, to plan.

Before anything else, it was obvious they had underestimated the Stranger Endbringer. They had expected it to only focus on keeping the other Endbringers alive, protecting the cores and keeping them from any instant kills.

It was clear it was much more involved than they expected.

Medea understood the logic now that she could see it happening with her own eyes.

The Endbringers focused on attacking and dealing the most damage in the shortest time. The Stranger concentrated on defence, keeping the murder machines going in this much more dangerous world that contained dozens of beings able to possibly kill them.

The division of labour allowed both sides to maintain energy output at a relatively low level, kept the Endbringers safe, and fulfilled their goal as conflict engines.

Medea could practically hear Mikael's voice in her mind, joking about it being an assembly line of death.

The actual voices in her head were much more feminine.

'What's the call,' Emma asked. 'We're still looking for the Stranger. Should we do something about the other Endbringers?'

'Kind of have our hands full with this one,' Yoruichi snarked back. She was working with the Flash and other speedsters on rescue operations for the injured, bringing them to the healer's tent where Tsunade, Melina, and Panacea were. 'Why hasn't the command center reported what is happening there? Some of the people who can't fight here would be good against the others. Let's get the Kryptonians to punch Bohu.'

'The Stranger might be blocking them from outside interference,' Medea hypothesized. 'It would explain why nobody noticed Leviathan moving towards Themyscira despite the close watch this world keeps on the Endbringers.'

It all kept coming back to the Stranger. That was key to this battle.

'Then we must confront them,' Artoria insisted.

Medea flew higher, retreating further from the fight and trying to copy Strange's scrying spell.

'As much as I wish to aid more,' Glynda chimed, voice steady as she concentrated on manipulating rubble with her Semblance and Haki to intercept as many of Behemoth's

blasts as possible. ‘Worrying about other cities in this situation is beyond us. We already face two Endbringers in this battle, directly or indirectly, and another faces our sisters. We must not bite more than we can chew.’

‘I understand the issue, I do,’ Artoria continued. ‘Attacking them would stretch us thin. No matter my wish to save people, I would not sacrifice any of you to do so. I do not believe it to be a good strategy or wise council to start new battles while one is still being fought. But something urges me. Some instinct warns me that we shall regret it most dearly if we leave them be. Something does not sit right about this whole situation.’

Medea’s mind went into overdrive.

She knew Artoria better than anyone else here. The King of Knights might not be the most intelligent or creative of the Family, but when it came to fighting sense, only Scathach, Diana, or Mikael matched her. While the Lancer and Ruler parts of her might not possess the skill, her aspect as the Goddess Rhongomyniad had Instinct at Rank A. It was a sense of intuition so strong that it bordered on clairvoyance when it came to battle.

They would be idiots to ignore her advice.

‘We’re still being distracted!’ Medea realized. ‘They only showed up once Mikael entered Olympus. That is way too suspicious.’

‘Then what is their true target?’ Glynda asked. ‘Mikael? Us? The cities they are attacking? What is the goal of all this?’

‘No matter what it is, it is not to our benefit,’ Artoria said. ‘Even if we know nothing else, we can be certain they are acting against us. Whether it is the gods, villains, the Endbringers themselves or some third force we are unaware of, they are conscious of our Family and have taken steps to mitigate our threat to their goals.’

Still trying to recreate the spell, Medea allowed half her mind to fall into memories.

What happens when two paranoid people are given fourteen ‘superweapons’ in a world filled with heroes, villains, and kaiju?

You better bet they are going to war-game the shit out of anything and everything.

Realization hit Medea with the force of one of Heracles’ punches.

A bunch of ideas, plans, theories and ‘what-ifs’ suddenly came to mind. Who can beat whom? Who is their worst threat? What do they need to fear?

And in a world filled with Endbringers, which ones could they take?

Behemoth was ranked in the middle. Easier than Leviathan and one other but harder than the other three.

‘They messed up,’ Medea told the rest of the Family, a plan coming together based on many nights with Mikael. ‘To spread our forces thin, they did the same. The Endbringers are tough, yes, but not unbeatable. Not when the Defences or we counter everything some

of them can do. If we go all out, we can not only interfere with their plans but also get the Stranger.'

'It won't be able to work with them all for long,' Yoruichi followed the train of thought. 'If we can deal enough damage to them, it will expend too much energy resetting them. We will be fighting it without fighting it. It will either have to retreat or give up on some of them to focus on others.'

'That is probably why only five Endbringers are active,' Tsunade postulated. 'The Stranger can only protect five at once. If we kill these before it, there is a good chance more will come online. Ones we do not know about.'

'What is the plan,' Melina asked.

'Safety is still our first priority, but we need to stop holding back as much for fear of collateral. Most of the city has already been evacuated. Tsunade, Glynda, Melina and I will remain here. Artoria, Emma, and Ranni, your roles remain unchanged. Yoruichi, you have Khonsu.'

'Got it!'

'Raven?'

'Yes,' the umbrakinetic answered, speaking for the first time.

She, for all she was one of the most powerful of the Family, had been the most passive in this fight. Raven's role was a trump card in this fight since Behemoth hard-countered most of what she could do. Her job was to teleport the Family if things went bad or finish the job on the core if they managed to reveal it.

'Leave your clones in our shadows for an emergency, but I need you to deal with Bohu. Distract it. Rescue people if you can. Your call if you can attack it or kill it. But your priority is your safety.'

'Understood.'

'What of the other twin?' Melina asked.

'Nobody is to engage with it at all,' Medea ordered, her mental voice deadly serious. 'Until we kill the Stranger and the others, it will be left to its devices as much as possible. If it attacks you, Raven, avoid it. Return to the Island if you need to.'

Thanks to their abilities and the Defences, the Family could fight all the Endbringers with much less difficulty than most heroes, even if the monsters were not holding back.

Tohu, however, was the only one Mikael genuinely feared.

Medea agreed.

'*Medea's in charge.*'

For once, her fate rested in her own hands.

She would not let anyone or anything wrench it from her grasp.

******

Nobody knew what was going on.

A combination of the early morning hours and the winter weather meant most of the streets were deserted. Most people would still have been asleep if not for the ongoing attack by Behemoth and the Endbringer sirens that had called many of their heroes away to fight the monster.

In the grey skies of the morning, the lack of witnesses meant that few saw the grey circle that appeared on the ground surrounding the Duma. The guards and staff there that early only had a heartbeat to wonder what was going on before the seat of the Russian government was engulfed in a cylinder of grey light that stretched from below the ground to the stratosphere.

Outsiders looking into the prison of grey light saw time pass in fast forward.

In less than an eye blink, everyone inside had dehydrated, starved, died, and become emaciated corpses.

Their bodies rotted and turned to bones in the second blink.

The third blink saw them wither to dust.

The fourth blink and the State Duma collapsed into rubble as the ravages of time undid its careful construction.

The fifth blink, and nothing remained but rocks and dust.

The cylinder of grey light vanished, and above what was once a symbol of Russia floated the monster.

Few survivors in the area saw what happened and lived to tell the tale, but the innumerable cameras that surrounded the area caught the appearance of the Endbringer.

It looked like a fat, malicious feral Buddha of black and white.

Smaller than Behemoth but larger than Leviathan, Khonsu was broad and menacing. Its face was a snarling mask of jet black, teeth glimmering with silver-white light. From its chest up and waist down, its body was a series of jagged black waves and curls, with jagged spikes and fins jutting from its limbs and interspersed with stripes of white energy that curved around its body like a tiger's stripes.

Its torso was a perfect sphere around which the upper body rotated, and six circles of grey energy, each at least three meters in diameter, floated lazily.

The Endbringer floated above the city for a long moment as if daring anyone to come to challenge it.

Six circles of grey energy lit up.

Columns of temporal power lanced out for miles, carving swirling paths of destruction and ruin wherever they passed. Buildings crumbled. Cars disintegrated. People died.

By the thousands.

Like a demented disco ball of death, Khonsu carved his existence into the world atop the dust of what was once a great city of mankind.

To Russia's credit, even with the surprise attack, it only took what heroes remained a few minutes to reach the fat Endbringer and try to lay siege to the monster.

They all died.

Trapped in cylinders of accelerated time, nobody survived long enough to lay a hand on the monster destroying one of the most populous cities in the world.

It wasn't their fault.

They were all that was left.

Their hardest hitters, toughest Brutes, and fastest Movers were all half a planet away, fighting for humanity as a whole. Upholding their duty even though they were trapped in schemes and powers much greater than them.

More than that, the defenders were fighting blind, unaware of what they were dealing with and the specifics of Khonsu's abilities.

The worst of Endbringer attacks was always when a new one first appeared. Heroes were unprepared, needing to learn how to fight a new threat, so deaths rose disproportionately compared to later fights.

Ignorance kills.

Knowledge is bought with a currency of corpses.

Moscow was paying that price.

******

Shihouin Yoruchi ran.

She had left Brockton Bay, Behemoth and the east coast behind in less time than it took to blink.

Shunpo was an advanced shinigami technique that focused on maintaining the fastest speed possible in the fewest steps needed to maintain that speed and control directional changes.

Yoruichi had earned her title of Flash Goddess by being the fastest Shunpo user in her world.

Within ten steps and a fraction of a second, Yoruichi was halfway across the Atlantic.

When she had first fled to the human world a century ago, Yoruichi had timed how

long it would take her to run around the globe. Using all her techniques except those with side effects and running along the equator only took her thirty-six seconds.

But she was not the same Yoruichi she was a century ago and a world away.

After the first ten steps, the former captain transformed.

Black fur covered her back and limbs. Black scales linked like armour over her hands, feet and chest. Black wings formed, like segmented blades, not along her back but linking her arms to her side in a manner similar to a bat made of swords. A long, sinuous, barbed tail covered in spikes and jagged fur sprouted behind her. Her face elongated into a draconic snout, eyes glowing with white light as she crossed through the night under the glow of Ranni's Dark Moon.

Between the tenth and eleventh steps, Yoruichi had transformed into her dragon form.

She was the smallest dragon of the Family and one of the only ones that could not fly.

But Yoruichi didn't want to fly.

She preferred to run.

And she had plenty of experience running on all fours.

But, even as she reached Europe with her eleventh step, she still was not done.

Her power gathered around her, Kido condensing around her so densely that it entered the visible spectrum as crackling white electricity. She wrapped it around herself, further enhancing her speed with the familiar energy of her Shunko technique, a mastery-level ability known only to her and her disciple.

And Yoruichi *still* wasn't done.

Most of the Family had spread their time training on the Island to various disciplines. Either sparring, getting a handle on their aura enhancements, learning their semblances, or getting ideas or knowledge from the massive library.

Not Yoruichi.

She might be a booze hound, a cat in heat, and an irredeemable prankster, but she was also one of the Family's deadliest.

She had devoted all her focus to one subject.

Haki.

The twelfth step placed her over Russia.

Black Armament Haki solidified over her scales. The white lightning of her Shunko flared with black energy as Yoruichi imposed her Will on the world.

The thirteenth step landed her in Moscow.

In sight of her target, Yoruichi finished her preparation as her Shunko lightning, already half-dyed black by Haki, condensed around her in her ultimate technique, a combination of her natural abilities, her expertise in Kido, and her speed.

The black dragon became more feline as the lightning formed her body into that of a beast.

Shunryuu Kokubyou.

A beastly goddess clad in lightning.

There was no fourteenth step.

******

A black-clawed fist wreathed in black-white lightning crashed through silicone flesh, the snarling face of an angry Buddha collapsing into nothing as Khonsu was punched downward.

KABOOM!!!!

With the force of a bomb, the Endbringer slammed into what was once a seat of the Russian government, cratering the city with the force of its bulk and the power of the attack.

The impact was cataclysmic, sending dust and debris flying as the entire city shook with the shockwave.

Yoruichi did not let the success of her first strike slow her down for even a moment.

Lightning crackled along her claws as she let loose an absolute flurry of blows that drove Khonsu further and further into the ground, deepening the crater and shaking the city with each impact.

Every punch, claw, or kick carved deeper and deeper into the sphere that surrounded Khonsu's core. Layers of defences, alternating physical material and glowing forcefields were pulverized as the shinigami tore into the monster with enough force that neighbouring cities recorded earthquakes as high as 5.2 on the Richter scale.

Shockwaves spread closer and closer to the Endbringer's core as Haki emitted in waves, destroying the layers of defences from the inside even as her punches decimated the outside.

Even the denser and denser layers of the Endbringers could not stand up to the force exerted by the combination of draconic power, advanced Haki usage, and Yoruichi's Shunryuu Kokubyou, all impacting it over and over again at sub-lightspeed.

She wasn't Speedforce fast, too low Tier still to match the Flash at his best, but she was damn close.

Rabid, euphoric joy filled the feline dragon as she dug further into her prey.

Had Khonsu been alone, Yoruichi might have killed the monster by herself in the first ten seconds.

But Khonsu was not alone.

As Yoruichi carved through a third of the sphere body, her prey vanished below her.

Khonsu was *reset,* floating above the massive crater that once housed its rotund body, completely uninjured.

A circle of light fell.

A grey cylinder rose from the crater, trapping the former captain in a zone of accelerated time.

Yoruichi gave a lazy, feline stretch, arching her back and eyed the outside through the wall of temporal power.

To her eyes, it looked like someone had clicked pause on the outside world. Motes of dust were frozen in the air, the clouds were stationary in the sky, and Khonsu did not move in her vision. No sound but the crackle of her lightning permeated this frozen world.

It should be noted that Khonsu is, to most, one of the most dangerous Endbringers when not holding back its full powers.

Unless someone had some way of halting their ageing process, a Breakers state or the equivalent, that could be maintained indefinity and had no need for food or drink, anyone trapped in one of the cylinders of accelerated time would die as decades passed in seconds.

Time claims all eventually.

Shinigami were no exception. They might live much longer than most mortals, but age and time would ravage them eventually. It was what made Baraggan such a threat during the Winter War in Yoruichi's home world.

To the Family?

Khonsu was an annoyance at best.

Those bound by the Catalogue did not age and did not need food or drink. Mikael could move without restriction, so he didn't even need to worry about being trapped and bored. Neither did anyone else if Diana was in the area as she used her Element of Freedom on those around her.

But Yoruichi was not a Dragon of Freedom.

She didn't need to be.

Khonsu was no Baraggan, and no Shinigami would fear being trapped in one of its accelerated time chambers. The dead did not follow the rules of the living.

Any material that lacked a spiritual component had no way of trapping those whose bodies were spirits.

With an idle scratch, Yoruichi simply stepped through the wall of grey light, fazing through it as she could any wall not made with spiritual or magical construction.

Sound returned, the screams of the citizens of Moscow, the rumbling from the

aftershocks of Yoruichi's opening attack, the sirens, the wails, and the crackle of black-white lightning.

If Endbringers could feel emotion, Yoruichi liked to think Khonsu was staring at her in stupefied surprise. In her mind, its mouth fell open in exaggerated shock, its eyes bulging from its face with cartoonish astonishment.

Not that it had time to be surprised.

No sooner had she stepped free of the zone of accelerated time than she was pummeling the Endbringer once more, a second crater forming from a new impact site as she beat the monster to smithereens.

Khonsu reset.

Four of its six fields of accelerated times shined on it as it sped up its own time to try and keep up with her.

It was not enough.

A third crater.

This time Yoruichi focused on trying to spread her Haki deeper into the layers of protection, bypassing the defences to try and attack the core directly.

Khonsu reset.

And fled.

Yoruichi yowled in anger as her prey disappeared from the skies above Moscow.

'The Vatican,' Emma called in her mind.

With a blast of black-white lightning, the dragon disappeared from Russia and appeared over the remains of the world's smallest country, carving a massive chunk from Khonsu with her claws.

It reset and teleported away again.

'London.'

Yoruichi crashed the Endbringer into the Thames River.

Reset. Flee.

'Mumbai.'

A massive angry Buddha crashed through the dust of what was once the Shree Siddhivinayak Temple.

Reset. Flee.

'Seoul.'

The city shook as an enormous body cratered Namsan Mountain Park.

'Toronto.'

'Find that damn Stranger!' Yoruichi called back mentally as a lance of grey energy turned the bottom of the CN Tower to nothing, sending the sky-scraping edifice tumbling

to the city below.

Draconic legs kicked the Endbringer into the sky, clouds parting from the force of the impact.

Reset. Flee.

'We're trying!' Emma answered urgently. 'Just do what you can. Cairo.'

Desert turned to jagged shards of glass as black-white lightning ravaged Endbringer flesh.

'Any clues yet?'

'I'm recreating one of the Sorcerer Supreme spells,' Medea answered, interrupted briefly by Emma telling Yoruichi of the Endbringer's appearance in Los Angeles. 'It locks onto their dimensional signature. I thought I could find it since I wasn't impaired by its protection, but it's not showing up anywhere on the planet.'

'Istanbul.'

Yoruichi tore gouges meters long in silicone flesh as Khonsu crashed through a freight ship into the sea of Marmara.

Reset. Flee.

'Rio.'

'Either this Endbringer is the only one who managed to deal with magic,' Melina said. 'Or it is not on the planet.'

The most deadly race in history continued across the world.

Khonsu would teleport somewhere and have enough time to get off one or two attacks thanks to its accelerated time, then Yoruichi would be on it again, ripping it to shreds at speeds most could not even see, let alone react to.

The individual attacks were not debilitating to any one place, certainly not to the degree the Endbringers usually caused, but to humanity, as a whole, it was like death by a thousand cuts. The death toll mounted with each passing second, each new city, every new tragedy.

Yoruichi had never been faster, able to circle the planet in seconds, but even she could not destroy the fat Endbringer fast enough to prevent the thousands of deaths. The delay between losing sight of the Endbringer, Ranni or Emma finding again and reporting it to Yoruichi was simply fatal to a world unprepared for this type of quick, deadly, hit-and-run warfare.

Khonsu could not even fight, let alone kill Yoruichi, but neither could she slay the beast when every injury was reset to nothing. She had done enough damage in a minute to kill any Endbringer twelve times over, but nothing lasted more than a second as the monster fled to the next target.

A battle of attrition was being warred in the skies of the planet. Every second that passed, more energy was drained from the Stranger, even as more of the earth, of humanity, was bled by each successive teleportation.

And so, the most deadly game of cat and mouse passed in flashes of grey, black, and white between the Endbringer of Time and a Dragon of Speed.

******

Unlike Brockton, trapped in the throes of twilight, or Moscow, beset in the early hours of a winter's morning, the sun was high in Beijing when the twins attacked.

Like Moscow, the people living there were unprepared and taken by complete surprise.

The first indication that something was wrong was when the earth shook in a ripple, expanding from the Forbidden City to cover the entire city in a twenty-mile diameter.

Twenty million people stumbled.

It wasn't an earthquake, an explosion, or the aftershocks of an impact.

It was the feeling of the ground under your feet falling a few inches.

From that tiny drop in height, unsteady buildings collapsed, cars crashed, and people fell to their deaths.

The screams were starting well before the population saw the Tower.

In Worm, the key to defeating Tohu and Bohu was to stop them before they ramped up. Preventing escalation was paramount to keeping the death count down when fighting the twins, as the Tower progressed through four phases, each more deadly than the last, and its sister, the potentikinetic, chose different superpowers one after another till it maxed out at three.

Bohu did not ramp up.

As soon as it appeared, it built its body drawn from the surrounding city. Root-like structures at its legs pulled the stone from below one of the world's largest population centers, sinking it lower in an outgoing ripple even as it tore apart the Forbidden City, one of humanity's most famous monuments, to build its body.

In seconds Bohu, the largest Endbringer the world had ever seen, towered over Beijing at five miles tall. It was humanoid in appearance but only as a character of humanity. Like someone had taken an already tall woman made of stone and stretched her well past the point of what was acceptable, her head five times as long as it was wide.

Blank stone eyes loomed over a doomed city from above the clouds, as tall as Mount Everest.

Tohu was a speck in the blue sky. The world's smallest Endbringer did nothing but float above the towering form of its sister, three heads still clear of any indication it had chosen powers to copy.

The shadow of this monster, so massive as to blot out the sky, sent the city into a teaming frenzy of fear, shock, and panic. Screams filled the sky as people called for aid, shouted for help, or stared in silent wonder and awe at a monster so giant their minds could hardly grasp the reality in front of them.

The quick-witted tried to flee either on foot or in cars.

It was already too late, though.

The first change, after the initial rumble and fall that built the Tower, was the walls.

Massive, fifty-foot edifices of stone, ten meters thick, surrounded Beijing ten miles from Bohu in every direction trapping its population in a cage.

Then the city started to *move*.

Walls shifted. Ceilings bent. Glass shattered. Buildings folded. Apertures were blocked. Streets were rearranged, shuffled, tucked over themselves and scrambled in such a chaotic melee confusing enough to make an M.C. Escher painting look like a child's crayon drawing.

Like Moscow, some Supers had remained behind for defence or because of incompatibility with Behemoth.

They, too, were trapped in Bohu's maze of death.

The vast majority still lived, trapped in sepulchral halls, narrow confines, claustrophobic buildings, streets wrapped like pretzels on themselves, or in long tunnels of darkness.

The screams continued, but no sound escaped the tombs of stone and steel.

In five minutes, the Tower stood in the center of a city as silent as the grave.

Every second, thousands died.

Crushed, smashed, smushed, suffocated, impaled on stone spikes, fell into pits and deadfalls or slipped on ground artificially made supernaturally smooth.

Panicked people scrambled desperately for escape, for freedom. They threw themselves against doors that didn't move, windows blocked by stone, and walls that closed in on them. Bloody fingers from cracked nails scraped over cement, searching for any way out as ceilings fell.

In a testament to the power of an Endbringer unleashed, Beijing and its twenty million inhabitants would become a graveyard in under an hour.

The once proud and beautiful city would remain a monument to the helplessness of man against the might of these machines of death and destruction.

But in that city that had become a tomb, Shadows stirred.

Hidden from Bohu, who perceived the world through tremors and vibrations, darkness spread through the depths.

Those who noticed the encroaching wave of pitch-black redoubled their screaming, scrambling against the walls for an escape that would never come.

In the face of the encroaching dark tide, none who lived escaped.

Occasionally, very rarely, some survivors would swear they saw four red eyes in the dark, alight with hellish power and malevolent amusement as they were swallowed in a sea of pitch blackness.

******

On an island hidden in the Mediterranean, a war for survival was being fought by a people abandoned by the gods.

In an evacuated city, blind heroes fought a war with the first of a host of monsters.

The world's deadliest race was run through the planet's skies, a war of speed and attrition.

From the depths of the largest grave the world had ever seen, a war of shadows was fought for the lives of millions.

All these battles, all this death and destruction, all the hopeless struggles against a doomed fate were but the death throes of a dying world.

For only when one world ends can another be born.

And the new world's first infant cry was two words spoken by the Goddess of the Chill Moon into the mind of her twelve sisters.

'Found it.'

Author's Note:

One of the hardest things I've faced as a writer of this Fanfiction is the limits of the medium of writing.

Every form of media has its advantages and disadvantages. Visual media, such as comics, television, or film, is really good at quickly presenting a lot of information. An image is worth a thousand words, after all.

When writing fight scenes, you don't have the luxury of image. Words alone are the tool I have to use to paint a scene with hundreds of colourful characters, powers flashing through the air every second, and situations changing and evolving from moment to moment. I can write hundreds of words describing what exactly is going on, only for a second to pass and needing to do it all over again. Not only would it lead to word bloat, but the pacing would die a slow, agonizing death and the plot not progress.

When Mikael fights one-on-one against someone like Radhan or Godfrey, I can get very granular and detail-oriented, which I like. But in a chaotic confusing mess like a bunch of heroes ganging up on Behemoth, who isn't holding back, I am left to create impressions and let the reader play out the scene in their heads.

I hope I am doing it justice.

I will see you next week.

TRIBUNAL V

No time, for morning rises
On the memory born from the ashes
with the heavens to sunset.
Blood red skies tranquil after the storm.
Blesséd shadow
Turning, wending, always night follows day
The sun will shine again.
Walk on, never look back.
Through you, we live.
Tales of loss and fire and faith,
Every word our hearts engraved.
In the dark, you will not stray.
Forge ahead 'til the end, we pray.

‘Found it.’

Tsunade didn’t let the mental conversation her Family was having shake her hand in the slightest as she deftly cut the charred remains of an arm from its stump with one hand and closed the resulting wound with the other.

Panacea would be able to regrow it later. Right now, keeping damage to a minimum and people alive was a priority.

Already, herself, five shadow clones, three hero healers she was unfamiliar with but would look into later, Melina and Panaca were rushing around to keep as many people alive as possible.

Between them all, if a hero made it to the healing station, they were practically guaranteed to survive and eventually recover. But time was not a luxury they had.

Every second, the ground rumbled, and the heat rose as Behemoth rampaged around the city despite the defender’s best efforts.

Heroes in the rescue team kept bringing in new patients, those whose lives could still be saved at least. The Flash was the face she saw the most often, depositing a new hero every few seconds, but others were doing what they could.

Early on, they had been able to heal their patients enough to get them back on their feet to fight. Superman, after Tsunade had pulled the kryptonite radiation from him, had flown right back into the melee to peel more injured or dying heroes from the Behemoth’s fires.

Now they didn’t have that time. They only had enough time to do the bare minimum to keep the survivors alive, knock them out so they weren’t in pain, and move on to the

next. All their beds were already full, and the injured were being laid out on cots on the floor so the healers could access them.

And these were the lucky ones.

Tsunade was infinitely grateful this world did not have the habit of calling out the names of the fallen and lost that she had heard happened in the novel this monster had come from.

There was nothing worse for a healer than to be reminded of all those they could not save.

'Where?' Yoruichi asked, her mental voice coming in a feral growl.

Tsunade felt a stab of worry for her friend and lover. She understood that the Shinigami was ideally suited to deal with the rotund Endbringer, but that didn't change the fact that she was fighting one by herself with only one of Raven's Emoticlones as a backup.

The Flash arrived with a new patient, and Tsunade took them without a hitch in her stride. Ash was pulled from a pair of punctured lungs, shrapnel pulled from their chest and flesh knit together under the green glow of her hand. It wasn't enough for any strenuous activity, but they'd live.

'The moon,' Ranni answered. 'It is… quite large.'

'How big,' Medea asked. 'Can you and Emma destroy it?'

An electronic drone of some sort laid two more patients at the entrance to the healing area. Only Tsunade approached, knowing only she was needed, thanks to her Element. Both were charred to an unrecognizable mess. The smell of burnt flesh already permeating the air intensified as she quickly approached.

One was already dead, not surviving the trip to them, but the other, possibly a brute of some sort, still drew wheezy, ragged, coughing breaths. Their clothes, hair, eyes, and genitalia had been burned away. Just looking at them, Tsunade knew they must be in excruciating pain, their raw nerves exposed to the hot air.

But they were here. They would live.

'Possibly,' Ranni hedged, sounding uncertain. 'I do not believe the combat will be quick. I do not fear its power but rather our ability to find and destroy its core. It covers a significant portion of this moon.'

'It's not like the others,' Emma explained further. 'Not thick. Wide. It looks almost two-dimensional, it's so thin. I don't even think it can move. It doesn't have limbs, like a blanket spread over the ground.'

'How big?' Medea asked again.

'Wider than Mikael's true body,' Emma explained, and Tsunade felt her breath hitch.

That was insanely huge, so large her mind couldn't even wrap her head around it. 'It's covering most of the Ocean of Storms, blending into the dust. It's crystalline and see-through. We wouldn't have found it if Ranni didn't seed the moon with so many dolls.'

There was a beat of mental silence as everyone racked their brains on what to do.

A moan of pain refocused the former Hokage on a new arrival, appearing in a portal of light. She quickly knocked them out and, with steady hands, withdrew the piece of rebar impaled in their guts.

'… Shall I attack it,' Artoria asked, clearly hesitant. 'I would be able to slay it with the power I currently possess.'

'No,' Medea denied instantly. 'We can't be blinded by the current situation. The Stranger isn't our goal. Ensuring as many survivors as possible is, us included, and the other Endbringers are a greater threat. They aren't holding back, so there is every likelihood that they will go for the mutual destruction option if they lose their shield. Civilization on this planet will not survive if all five Endbringers go apocalyptic simultaneously.'

'I agree with Medea,' Glynda pipped in. 'Artoria, you need to stay where you are. But we do need to do something quickly. We cannot get Behemoth into the bay with the Stranger active, and the longer these fights last, the higher the death toll.'

Tsunade brought the three newest arrivals, each bleeding heavily from open wounds to Melina. While not a medic, the Kindling Maiden's Erdtree spell significantly accelerated the body's healing. It couldn't do anything complicated, but cuts and the like were easily fixable by bathing in its glow.

Tsunade took a brief instant to look over the one-eyed woman.

Physically she looked fine, focusing on channelling her magic and bathing the entire room in a golden glow. Emotionally… Tsunade noticed her clenched fists, fingers slightly dyed red from split palms that healed as soon as they opened.

The Hokage had no idea what was happening in the woman's head. She wasn't one to talk about herself, or much at all, really. Still, she could take a guess.

Helpless anger was all too common in situations like this.

Tsunade would have to ask Mikael to talk with the woman when he returned.

If he returned.

'We will,' Medea reassured. 'We just need to time it right. Raven, what's the situation there?'

'Not good,' Raven's voice was as monotone as ever, but Tsunade could detect the strain in it as she concentrated on maintaining her focus. She was the strongest of the Family apart from Mikael, but this wasn't a question of power but control. 'Half are out,

more every second, but I cannot get to them all fast enough to save them all. Millions are dead. Tohu hasn't moved.'

'…Stay there and keep up the rescue effort, but Pride will deal with the Stranger.'

'Without Pride, I will not be able to kill Bohu,' Raven said, not countering Medea's order, just pointing out a fact.

'You won't. On my count, I want Ranni to trap the Stranger in her Diorama. Can you do it?'

'With the blessing of our Lord Husband? T'would be child's play.'

Tsunade shook her head at the maudlin thoughts.

Mikael would return.

No matter what he had gone through, he always came back. So long as his body remained safe, nothing could truly kill him.

More than that, Mikael was a cautious man. He would do all he could to ensure he survived and returned to his Family.

He was not Nawaki, Dan, Sarutobi, Jiraya, or Naruto.

Mikael would return.

He had to.

'I'm giving us a minute,' Medea continued. 'On the mark, have the Emoticlones start bringing every still active hero to Beijing. They will deal with Bohu while we focus on the others. They'll be confused but can't miss it, and the Stranger will be gone. With so many flyers, no defence and Glynda and I leading them, we should be able to kill it quickly.'

'And Tohu?' Melina asked. 'It will not remain idle as it is now.'

'If we're lucky, the loss of the Stranger, the other Endbringers, and Bohu will make it retreat. If we're unlucky, it will go all out,' Medea sighed. 'From there, it will depend on its limit.'

'Who will get Behemoth to the bay?'

'I will,' Tsunade answered Artoria for the caster. 'I'm the only one left.'

Already the former Hokage was leaving the medical area, trusting her shadow clones, Melina and the other healers, to keep the current injured alive.

After she was done here, she'd follow the other heroes to Beijing.

'Sixty seconds starting now. Get ready.'

Tsunade ran up the side of a nearby building, chakra keeping her sandals attached to the stone walls.

'Ready,' Emma reported immediately.

'I have been prepared since the beginning,' Artoria said, her voice dissatisfied as her roll forced her into passivity.

With a final push, Tsunade launched herself over Brockton Bay. She ascended quickly, looking around to find Behemoth.

'I am prepared as well,' Ranni said.

'Give the signal,' Glynda answered as well.

It was not hard to find the monster.

It towered over the skyline, a jagged obsidian giant lit up in the night by flames and lightning. Heat haze filled the evening, distorting the light. Zipping and flying heroes and attacks surrounded it like flies buzzing around a bonfire.

Tsunade landed on a roof and propelled herself toward the action with leaps that should have cratered the buildings if not stopped by her exquisite chakra control.

'Pride is in place. So are the others. I will focus on preventing further damage here.'

'Let me kill this thing already,' Yoruichi's mental voice growled along their minds.

Tsunade landed four blocks from the fight, the rumbling ground not affecting her even as the heat, fire and noise turned this city section into a smouldering ruin.

Tsunade planted her feet firmly amongst the rubble. Until it was time, she would not move. No matter that the street cracked and caved, that the house in front of her burned, or lightning crashed nearby, the Hokage remained unmoved.

Preparing.

'I'm ready,' she told the group.

Ignoring the screams was the worst part.

Tsunade didn't think of herself as a good person. She had fought too much, killed too many, and had others do magnitude more in her name during her time as the leader of the strongest hidden village in the world.

She had been a ninja, a kunoichi.

The strongest kunoichi in her world.

A mercenary killer and assassin.

40 D-Ranks. 236 C-Ranks. 467 B-Ranks. 418 A-Ranks. 95 S-Ranks. Three world wars.

Her record.

All the missions she had accomplished in her life. All the people she had killed, livelihoods ruined, and enemies sabotaged.

All the comrades lost.

A body fell near her with a meaty thud, features completely unidentifiable by the blackened flesh of someone burned and struck by lightning. Female, her medical knowledge told her based on the hips. Who she had been, what her story was, her dreams and aspirations, or if she had a family to mourn her, it was all unknown.

Tsunade did not let the familiar feeling of death, the scent of burnt flesh and the

minor ache of regret break her focus.

Bright purple marks covered her body, winding in leaves and swirls from the diamond on her forehead.

Senju Tsunade was not a good person.

'On my mark.' For the first time since Mikael had left her in charge, Medea's voice was not the controlled tempo of a leader. It was angry, simmering with suppressed rage. 'These things have attacked our new home. Killed millions. Beseiged our sisters. Lured away our husband into a trap. They are trying to ruin our happy ending. We will not let them! Kill them all!'

The warcry of a vengeful woman.

Behemoth roared, and heroes froze for a second as the great mental blanket that covered the world disappeared along with its creator.

Despite the terrible tragedies of the day, Tsunade felt herself form a grim smile.

Senju Tsunade wasn't a good woman. She wasn't a hero or a saint.

All she was, all she had ever been, was a woman fighting for her home.

For her friends and family.

That was all Senju Tsunade would ever be.

'We have it!'

The tree grew.

******

Unit 00 did not think.

It simply was.

A tool, a lesser one at that, it had no great thoughts or deep plans.

It simply was.

Unlike Unit 01, which advanced indomitably to achieve its goals.

Unlike Unit 02, which found purpose in the trickery and cruelty.

Unlike the former Unit 03, which sought out ever-increasing data for its prediction models to be increasingly accurate.

Unit 00 did not move.

Its current location was perfectly suitable.

Energy from light, radiation, and other sources were absorbed efficiently thanks to its unique body.

No being came to this location, which would require using energy to disrupt their cognitive functions.

And so, Unit 00 could fulfill its task of ensuring the continued function of the other Units.

Unit 00 did not feel any emotions.

It did not care that Unit 03 was lost.

It was not concerned that Unit 04 was being repeatedly destroyed.

It did not even feel confidence or satisfaction as it carried out the task of blocking the native inhabitants of the nearby planet from being able to destroy the other Units.

Unit 00 had a body more extensive than most countries to absorb more energy for use, but it did not have an identity like the other Units developed.

Like Unit 03, it could perceive the past. Unlike Unit 03, it could not calculate the future and instead saw the present. Unit 00 could only perceive the world through the minds of those it affected and those of the other Units.

With no senses of its own, no thoughts of its own, no goals of its own, Unit 00 was, in every definition, a machine.

It was simply a series of inputs and outputs.

All designed to push forward the Prime Objective.

Unit 00 continued to fulfill its task, resetting the other Units and directing focus away from specific topics.

It was energy intensive with so many active Units, so Unit 06 remained on standby while Unit 05 fulfilled their part of the objective.

Despite the significant power requirement from the constant resets, Unit 04 had accomplished 67% of the current mission objective.

Until the other Units finished their assigned tasks, Unit 00 would remain active, observing the world through the eyes of others.

Then it could observe no more.

"… It's not doing anything," a voice echoed through the Diorama.

Unit 00 could not hear it, lacking ears of its own.

"Perchance it is like the bird, the Ziz, that our Lord Husband killed? Unable know us though we be before it."

"…That sucks! I had this whole speech planned. This is my first actual use of Trigon's power!"

"Our enemies' weakness is our strength."

"I don't care! This was my moment! Saving people, blech! We should have killed the jumped-up pile of rubble and its stupid sister. That would have been fun. Not like flat face here."

Unit 00 could not see the blue doll argue with the monster of shadow and flame, for it had no eyes.

“Hath thee found its core?”

“I’m looking! Give me a minute. This thing is freaking big, even if it’s boring. I wish I was with Daddy. I bet he’s having fun. I wanna slap around some gods. Little pricks.”

“Lady Raven deals with thee at all times? My regard for her patience hath increased.”

“I’m awesome! Everyone knows red is better than blue. Ask Daddy. He’d rather be balls-deep in my cunt any day over spending a second with your frigid ass. I bet you’re a dead fish in bed.”

“How crass. And wrong. Our Lord Husband is all-loving in his tyranny to his consorts. Of which you are not one. Thou art a pet. His care for Lady Raven merely means he aids her in control of thee. The only joy he finds in thee is to, I believe the term be, ‘smack a bitch.’”

Unit 00 knew nothing.

It was cut off from the other Units.

It was cut off from the Creator.

It was unable to fulfill the Prime Directive.

Unit 06 would activate with extreme parameters.

“… You wanna hate fuck when this is done?”

“What.”

“It’ll be hot. We can invite Daddy.”

“… We shall see.”

“Heh. Score. We’ll get to see who’s really better in- ah, found it. It’s not round like the others. Flat, like the rest of this fucker. It’s moving around pretty quickly.”

“I cannot detect it. How can thee tell?”

“A slight change in its shadow where the light passes through. I got it now.”

Unit 00 did not think.

It simply was not.

******

From below the earth, wooden roots crashed through the street, winding their way from chthonic depths at her call. They twirled and intertwined, weaving together in dense, intricate patterns so detailed and specific that any doctor or scientist would have goggled at their accuracy.

Wooden spikes pierced Tsunades flesh, and the purple marks of her Strength of a Hundred Seal spread to the wood around her as it grew and grew.

The library of the mansion was enormous, containing anything ever written in their

home worlds. So long as the books were not magic or the local equivalent, they were recorded in the library for their perusals.

Including her grandfather's notes on his techniques.

Senpou Mokuton: Shin Suusenju was perhaps one of the single most powerful jutsu her world had ever seen. The thousand-armed wooden Buddhist figure it summoned had been able to battle and defeat Uchiha Madara and the greatest-tailed beast clad in Susanoo's full armour.

Tsunade could not do that. She had her Element for far too short of time, only a few months, to be able to bring forth the greatest wood-release technique.

Even if she could, Tsunade would not summon the Veritable 1000-Armed Kan'on.

She was Senju Tsunade, not Senju Hashirama.

The heroes not teleported away immediately saw the giant wooden statue rise from the destroyed city. Towering at forty-five feet tall, fourteen metres, most could tell it was female thanks to the large breasts, even in the flickering lights of the fires. Those with better eyes could see it was made perfectly human but lacked the skin to cover the wooden muscles. It also lacked genitalia. Those with better eyes and medical knowledge immediately knew it was an anatomically perfect woman.

Only one Family knew that the surface wooden muscles, the internal organs, and blood flow were a perfect recreation of Senju Tsunade. The only thing it lacked was skin, as a layer of thin bark would not increase defence and would instead decrease mobility.

A combination of her medical knowledge, wood release, and the study of Swamp Thing had allowed the former Hokage to create this technique.

Senju Tsunade was the Female Titan, and the Female Titan was her.

(It should be noted that Mikael was the one to name the technique. Other alternatives had been suggested, but he refused to let anyone else try to change it. Tsunade had given up after the first day.

Now if only he would tell her why he kept singing 'Call Your Name' whenever he caught her practicing the technique. She liked the song, its lyrics and sad tone speaking to her on a deep level. It was just weird he would do it every time.

In the end, Tsunade chalked it up to Mikael being Mikael.)

The very last of the heroes to disappear into their own shadows saw the wooden Tsunade launch itself at Behemoth, crashing through buildings as its body darkened in a black layer of Armoured Haki and purple markings.

Nobody but drones and a few remaining building cameras were around to witness the Female Titan crash through a torrent of lightning and fire and smash the Endbringer in its craggy chest.

Behemoth was an energy manipulator. All forms of energy could be controlled. That included kinetic energy. Any sort of physical attack did nothing to it as it redirected or reflected that force back on its user with deadly results.

Silicone flesh cratered and caved under wooden fists, and the Herokiller crashed through a row of shops as Tsunade's punch launched the beast north.

The blonde had not focused solely on Haki like Yoruichi. Her Armament wasn't at the level of dealing internal damage, nor was her chakra so large that she could maintain this technique and deal her standard damage for long periods of time.

If the Female Titan had just been a wooden construct like her grandfather's technique, Tsunade would have had a tough but less dangerous technique than her regular chakra-enhanced punches and kicks.

But Tsunade was not a Wood-Dragon.

The access to wood release was just a byproduct of her genetic predisposition, her Element being close enough, and Soul Talent.

Like the others in her Family, Tsunade's expression of her Element was wholly unique to her. A combination of perfect chakra control and a connection to all the Life around her.

Like Naruto and Jiraiya before him, Senju Tsunade had become a Sage.

Tsunade chased Behemoth, each stride swallowing meters as the Female Titan cratered the city streets. Long gone was the consideration for collateral damage in this blasted ruin. All that was left was to kill these monsters that sought to rip her from her newest Family.

Behemoth, no longer able to reset with the loss of the Stranger, was forced to regenerate as it rose to its feet.

Tsunade's second punch took the monster on the spiked chin, sending it skidding further northeast for a few blocks.

Better prepared, the Endbringer kept its feet. Fire and lightning crashed into the Female Titan's armoured form, unable to burn the wood that made up its body.

Tsunade was not a woman piloting a giant robot.

She was the Female Titan, and it was her, down to the last cell.

This meant the Female Titan was protected by the Defences that kept the Endbringer from burning it from the inside out, as it had done so many heroes. Behemoth's energy manipulation could not work from within, and any blast from without met blackened Haki.

Left with only one foe immune to its kill aura and without the Stranger, Behemoth focused solely on killing this woman.

The heat haze, the aura of energy that surrounded the Herokiller, made up of radiation, fire, electricity and innumerable other forms of energy alien to Earth, disappeared as Behemoth judged it a waste of power.

The Female Titan spun a kick at the monster's chest, hoping to drive it closer to the sea.

Behemoth took the blow on its chest, unable to manipulate the Senjutsu of the attack as it deformed its torso with an air-shattering crash.

It did not move an inch, mountainous feet planted in the ruins of buildings as it dissipated its own kinetic energy. Observation Haki flared a warning, and senjutsu-enhanced reflexes kicked in, but unbalanced as she was, Tsunade could not withdraw her leg fast enough.

Ignorance kills.

Never in Worm had Behemoth done something like this, so the Family had been unprepared for this sudden change in tactics.

An obsidian fist held the Female Titan's ankle firmly in an unbreakable grip.

Behemoth heaved Tsunade over itself, smashing her onto and through a city block. Breath escaped wooden lungs as her back met unyielding earth.

Then Behemoth did it again, swinging the Female Titan over its head to crash her into another city section. Over and over again, Behemoth swung the wooden construct through more buildings and along the ground. Had any heroes still fought the first Endbringer, they might have been killed by its new improvised weapon.

No matter what strength the Female Titan used to try and dislodge its ankle, the Endbringers wrist was, quite literally, an immovable object.

Tsunade felt every blow, every crash and smash, every twisted piece metal, shard of glass or stone wall. Haki mitigated most of it, but she still felt pain.

She felt it as, with no other choice, she severed her own leg to free herself.

She felt it as Behemoth, having lost its hold, chased her body and pounced.

She felt it as a craggy, jagged, clawed fist, enhanced with more kinetic energy than physically possible, smashed through her Haki, the chest beneath it, the Buloke bones of her wooden skeleton, and grasped the wooden heart beneath.

The tradeoff she paid to use Haki and Sage mode through the wooden construct. A plant might not have a nervous system, but she did, and so extensive was the medical knowledge needed to create this technique, so did the Female Titan.

Tsunade was the Female Titan, and the Female Titan was her.

Tsunade's beating heart was ripped from her chest, and she felt every agonizing second of it.

Behemoth, the engine of murder and destruction that it was, did not celebrate its triumph.

It just turned southeastward, aiming for the parts of the city still unevacuated.

Indomitable.

Never slowing.

Always progressing forward.

That was how Behemoth fought.

Tsunade had been doing it wrong. She realized that now. She should not have been trying to punch and kick Behemoth into the ocean. She should have led it there.

Ah well.

Live and learn.

The tree grew.

Purple markings squirmed with power, her Creation Rebirth growing a new heart in her chest and a new leg from her stump.

Even before becoming a Life Dragon, Tsunade was hard to kill.

Now?

In the entire Family, only Artoria and Mikael were tougher.

******

The world's deadliest race ended quickly.

Yoruichi, even so deep into her beastly mindset, knew it had to.

Khonsu was different from the others. It could teleport without the Stranger's aid. If she gave it the opportunity, it would flee and live to fight another day.

Yoruichi refused to allow her prey to escape.

'Singapore.'

Black claws carved legs from a spherical chest.

Khonsu reset and fled.

'Paris.'

'We have it!'

Ranni's cry of triumph brought a feral grin to Yoruichi's maw.

This time, when her Haki-infused fist shattered Khonsu's chest, the Endbringer did not reset.

The fat Endbringer stuttered for a second as if in surprise, and Yoruichi used the opportunity to smash the monster into a nearby park.

Black claws tore deep, Haki shattering layers and layers of forcefields.

Then the Endbringer was gone, teleporting away without resetting or healing.

For a second that lasted an eternity, Yoruichi felt rage boil. Her prey was gone! Escaped to some other dimension or hiding hole that she could not find. There was no soul to track, no scent on the wind. It was just gone.

Then Emma's voice rang in her mind once more.

'D.C.'

Yoruichi was gone in an eye blink, reappearing in the sky over the U.S. capital.

Khonsu was there, still injured and standing in the ashes of its newest target. It had clearly sacrificed healing and speed for a greater attack. All six of its cones of temporal energy swirled around it, decimating the surrounding area.

Yoruichi was too far gone to care about where she was.

All she saw was her prey.

Khonsu, without its time fields to speed it up, was helpless when the Dragon of Speed tore it apart, earth-shaking with every blow. The fat monster struggled, trying to bring its circles of power to bear against the black dragon ripping into it.

Yoruichi let it, knowing that her hunt was at its end and this was the final flails of a dying animal.

Grey silicon sundered, forcefields shattered, and a pulsing black orb appeared to her Haki-enhanced senses.

Its core shattered on black and white claws, lightning crackling with deafening intensity.

Yoruichi, the Beastly Goddess clad in lightning, roared her victory in the deadly race in the shattered remains of Khonsu.

******

Tsunade's fist crashed into a mass of spiky rocks that resembled a face, not budging the monster as it continued to negate its own movement but carving half its head away in jagged splinters.

The Female Titan dodged the retaliatory punch. It was fast and powerful, a testament to the enhancements Behemoth was placing on itself to keep up with her, but it was also unskilled.

Tsunade had been one of the greatest taijutsu specialists in her world. Then she gained Martial Talent and spent a year training with Shihouin Yoruichi, Artoria Pendragon, Scathach and Wonder Woman.

The day she lost a fistfight against a dumb brute was the day she gave up drinking

entirely.

Another senjutsu-powered kick deformed its legs, and she flipped away from its attempt to grab her once more.

The Female Titan was a whirl of motion, punches and kicks. Any hold would have been suicide, so Tsunade kept up a tornado of attacks. She smashed and punched parts of the Endbringer clean off with each blow, shockwaves in the air ringing in the night.

The Endbringer advanced.

Lacking any external power expression, it focused everything on healing as it chased the target of its ire.

No building blocked its way.

No shattered limb slowed its march.

It would kill this woman, this being that so hurt it.

Nothing could stop it.

Not even the ocean.

The Female Titan stood upon the waves of the bay, rising and falling with its swell.

Behemoth advanced.

The ocean boiled, lava erupting under the monster's feet with every firm step. Superheated steam filled the air, enough to boil the lungs from within.

If the woman thought the ocean would slow it down, she was wrong.

The Female Titan retreated further upon the waves, the steam not impeding Behemoth's 'view' of the creature.

Then Tsunade was gone, the wooden giant disappearing into a doorway of light.

Behemoth kept its 'eye' on the spot, wary of any reemergence after the last trick pulled caught it with its back turned.

It was already too late.

"Gather here! Ye Heroes. Ye Knights. Ye masses praying for salvation. Gather here and ***Be Brilliant in Bright Ehangwen, My Radiant Hall!"***

Shining white, brilliant walls rose around Brockton Bay. Powered by a Command Seal, the massive edifice was large enough to encompass the entire city and its environs.

From above the clouds, atop Dun Stallion, Artoria breathed a sigh of relief. Even with her expanded Spirit Origin to accommodate her Goddess and Ruler versions, holding that much power within herself for so long had been taxing.

Now Mikael's Command was carried out, she could do her duty.

Behemoth threw itself against those pristine walls with an earthshaking force. When physical blows failed to fall the defensive fortification, it turned to fire, lightning, sound, and more, all fruitlessly thrown against white walls.

Behemoth released a miniature nuclear blast that failed to destroy the A+ ranked Noble Phantasm powered by the Elden Lords' command.

Those evacuated to the southeast, away from Behemoth's projected rampage, those still waiting for evacuation, and the recovering heroes in the medical area were finally safe.

But the fight was not over.

Mikael had not powered Ehangwen to defend against Behemoth.

He had powered it up with a Command Seal so the city would survive what came next.

"Sacred lance, removing restraints!"

Thirteen seals bound King Arthur's weapons. Thirteen strictures were placed to limit the power of the holy lance. Half needed to be released to deploy it at all.

The enemy must be more powerful than oneself,

The enemy must not be an elemental.

The battle must be one against evil.

The battle must not involve personal gain.

The battle must not be against humanity.

The battle must not be inhumane.

The battle must be to defend human order.

One's comrades-in-arms must be courageous.

The battle must not be against one pure of heart.

The battle must be an honourable one.

Eleven of thirteen seals were released, on Sir Palamedes' and Sir Kay's conditions remained unfulfilled as the battle was not one-on-one, nor was Behemoth capable of killing Artoria.

If all thirteen were ever released, it would cease to be a lance and return to being a tower of light, anchoring the layers of the world together with a power to sunder the planet.

"Light, may you be released from the ends of the world. Split the heavens and tether the earth, anchor of the storm!"

Night turned to day.

A tower of light, shaped into a spear miles wide, split the clouds. A Divine Construct, the Land that Shines to the Ends of the World fell upon the first Endbringer.

Golden radiance rained upon Brockton Bay, the white walls of Ehangwen gleaming with radiant light.

Behemoth disappeared in a waterfall of golden light, still flinging itself fruitlessly

against the walls of King Arthur's halls looked up. The monster turned down, trying to escape the coming calamity by burrowing deep into the earth.

"Rhongomyniad!!"

It did not get deep enough.

The world buckled.

The seas of the bay disappeared, evaporating in an instant of gold as the Spear of the End destroyed silicone flesh and the core it contained within in a cataclysmic blast.

Brockton Bay survived, protected by a wall powered by Mikael's third seal.

Battered, ruined, burned, a trail of destruction started at the base of Captain's Hill Memorial and curved through the central city before emptying into the ocean.

But the city still lived.

And another Endbringer had died.

Everyone from New York to Boston saw the spear fall upon the bay.

Everyone worldwide watched the footage of the death of the first Endbringer.

Everyone watching saw that golden glow and felt hope for a new tomorrow.

If they could live through today.

The battle for humanity's future was not over.

******

Glory Girl had absolutely no freaking clue what was going on.

To be fair, that was a relatively common experience these days. One doesn't die and be resurrected six years later without some mental whiplash. Spending the next month in a secret Justice League underground bunker for M/S observation had not helped, seeing as she had been kept from outside influences like news or the internet.

Spending time with her sister had been nice, but Amy could get Amy-ish if she didn't get her alone time. The only other forms of entertainment in the isolated station had been movies, which Victoria had decimated quickly to help catch up on newer releases, and a small library of books.

The resurrected heroine had been so bored at one point, Amy caught up tinkering with the new limits of her power that, she had read a book.

Yuck.

The only time she had escaped had been that throwdown with Doomsday, but then it was right back into the boring hole.

Then the Endbringer sirens had rung. Behemoth was attacking her old home city.

Glory Girl had been alive when the Herokiller had first appeared, though she had not

fought it on its first appearance.

She had been there for its second and third attacks, though. That was before the League had been formed, and people were scrambling to formulate a response to the monsters that seemed to be immortal. A young heroine at the time (though she was only about half a year older now, biologically speaking), Glory Girl had aided with search and rescue rather than confronting the monster directly.

The heat, the lightning, the sound, the fear. It had been overwhelming the first time and only slightly less so the second time.

Then Victoria Dallon died with her family, never seeing the first appearance of Leviathan or the Simurgh.

Bored out of her mind, filled with righteous anger to protect her home, and tempered by her experience with the Endbringer, Glory Girl was ready to lay some serious smackdown on the big bastard.

It helped that she didn't have to worry about its kill aura anymore, had a few new tricks to try out, and that the Bossman was there to ensure they killed the firey bastard.

So Glory Girl had been hyped to kick some rocky ass.

Then things got weird.

Everyone around her started acting freaky when Mikael explained how he had killed Ziz. Victoria knew she wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but even she could understand 'find core, smash core.'

Everyone else?

It was like they weren't even listening and then getting angry at the Boss when he repeated himself.

Freaky.

Then Superman got all serious-like and told everyone to listen to the Boss, and things seemed to get better. At least they were ready to throwdown with Behemoth, and the Boss would worry about killing it.

Only, neither Bossman nor Behemoth were where they were supposed to be.

Behemoth was in the city, and Mikael was nowhere to be found.

Before she died, Glory Girl had been likened to a young and inexperienced Wonder Woman. A flying brick, she had sometimes been called. It wasn't wrong, per se, but it often dismissed just how useful being able to fly, hit hard, and take hits that would kill most others really was.

Yes, she had died, but that had been when she was taken by surprise in her own home by one of the craftiest villains in the world. Victoria was confident she could absolutely dismantle the Joker in any other circumstance.

Against Behemoth?

Glory Girl could do nothing.

Victoria punched hard. It was kind of her *thing*.

Her thing didn't work when the Endbringer dissipated all the kinetic energy of her punch into nothing.

Glory Girl almost died for a second time then, as a blast of lightning destroyed her energy shield, sending her flying through the air.

She would have died before she could catch herself if Glynda hadn't telekinetically caught her and levitated a piece of rubble between her and another bolt that would have fried her, Defences or no.

From there, Glory Girl returned to search and rescue, doing what she could even as she fumed with impotent helplessness to fight off the monster laying waste to her home, killing her comrades, and getting off without even a scratch, resetting to full functionality any time it took too much damage.

It was infuriating.

It was terrifying.

It was enough to drive a woman to despair.

Then Glory Girl felt her shadow try and swallow her, and she instinctively fought it off, knowing that if she didn't, it would teleport her… somewhere.

The other heroes, she saw, could not do the same and were subsumed into darkness. Some, the quickwitted or observant, tried to flee. But not even the Flash can run from his own shadow, and they were all caught in the end.

"What is happening?" Victoria asked herself, eyes wide with fear and not expecting a response.

"We're needed elsewhere," a stern voice answered her, to Glory Girl's surprise. Glynda Goodwitch, the woman who had saved her life earlier, telekinetically floated up toward the resurrected heroine. "Come on, let Raven take you. I think you'll appreciate being able to actually hit something."

Then she was gone, swallowed in an inky blanket.

When the feeling of sinking into her shadow overcame Victoria once more, she let it wrap her in its velvet embrace.

Then it was bright.

The darkness of the night, the blackness of shadow, gave way to bright midday sunshine.

No. That was wrong.

It was bright and sunny, certainly, but shadows still covered them. It fell from fifty-

foot stone walls and, beyond, from the massive Tower that breached the blue sky so high that Victoria could not see the top.

She was in a clear field, surrounded by other heroes who were stumbling around in confusion, some gripping their heads and others blinking blearily at the change in lighting. The benefits of the Boss' Trump powers automatically translating half a dozen languages in her mind.

"What's going on?"

"Where are we?"

"Where's Behemoth?"

"My mind! Someone messed with my mind!"

"Our memories! The Endbringer blocked our memories!"

"We've been Mastered!"

Panic started to build, blind fear claiming a hold on usually intractable men and women as they realized the depths of the control they had been under. Memories of fighting Behemoth, Leviathan and even the Simurgh flowed through them.

The Stranger had not erased memories, as doing so for the entirety of the planet would have been wasteful. Instead, it simply redirected focus away and let the brains fill in the missing pieces for themselves. Not only was that more power efficient, but it also made it harder for people to notice the difference as it was their own minds doing the heavy lifting.

All that was gone now, leaving a world's worth of heroes scrambling with the realization that they had been puppets in a play. Fighting and dying without knowing they were accomplishing nothing.

It was enough to drive even normally sane men insane with fear, regret, and panic.

Thankfully, there were those present who could direct their attention away from their realizations and toward more viable and punchable targets.

"Everyone!" A magically enhanced voice echoed around the area, drawing attention to the woman floating in the sky. Blue hair, elven features, clad in a purple robe and with staff in hand, Medea addressed the gathering of the world's heroes. "You've been under the Stranger power of an Endbringer. It prevented you from truly fighting them. I understand what you are going through, more than you can imagine."

Victoria believed her.

There was pain and anger in Medea's voice, an empathetic rage that told the listeners that she had once been where they were, manipulated and controlled. That feeling, that empathy, was what kept the heroes listening more than her words.

"I wish you had time to recover, but you don't. Every second we waste, thousands die.

Behemoth was a distraction. While we fought it, other, newer Endbringers have been laying waste to our homes."

"*Endbringer attacks in Moscow, Beijing, Vatican City, London, Mumbai, Seoul, Toronto, Cairo…*" Dragon reported, her voice stirring the crowd into a frenzy with every new city. Their homes were under attack. Their families and friends were in danger. More than one flyer started to leave, desperate to return home to save their loved ones.

"*It is one Endbringer behind most of the attacks*," Batman's gruff voice stopped many in their tracks.

"Khonsu," Medea answered their questioning gazes. "We know it from another world." Glory Girl supposed that made sense. They had a Raven and a Diana from other worlds. They must have faced versions of it before. "It, along with Behemoth, Leviathan, and the Stranger Endbringer, are being handled by my Family. We will kill them. But we cannot do everything."

"How can we help?" Eidolon asked, floating in front of the witch. He was joined by Superman and Dr. Strange a moment later.

"Rescue people. Kill an Endbringer. Be heroes." Medea answered, pointing her staff upward at the enormous stone Tower. "That is Bohu. A spatial manipulator that focuses on geokinesis. It has built its body out of Beijing, trapping over twenty million people in its labyrinth and killing thousands every second." There was an outcry of disbelief from most of the heroes, especially the Chinese, and some did not stay to listen to more, launching themselves at and over the stone walls. Medea continued as if undisturbed. "We have rescued half of them and are working on more, but we can't do that and kill it simultaneously. Its true body is hiding somewhere in that Tower."

"Got it," Eidolon said, jettisoning towards the enormous rocky monster, power gathering in a ball of light in his hands.

Even as other heroes followed, some faster than others, Medea continued to talk, her voice enhanced even further to ensure everyone heard.

"Its actual body is small. Find its core and destroy it, and you will kill the Endbringer. Be careful, though. It has a twin with it. Tohu can manifest any three powers. If you see anything with three heads, be prepared to run."

Glory Girl had only the barest understanding of what was going on, but what she did know was that she had a large target to take her frustration out on.

Flying over the massive city, Victoria Dallon watched the hive of heroes set to quick work. Like ants on a hill, they swarmed over distorted buildings, through knotted streets, and under ceilings and walls made into caricatures of modern art.

They smashed through stone spikes that rose to meet them.

They flew over pits and traps.

When the walls closed in, they shattered them as well.

Bohu was not inactive, claiming the lives of a few who made mistakes in their unfamiliarity with this new enemy. Stone crushed, battered, and impaled those unprepared for this latest battle.

Still, the heroes advanced in the destroyed city.

For a brief, wild instant, Victoria felt a burst of pride as she watched them press forward.

Their lives were dangerous, frequently unrewarding and fraught with peril. But there were still heroes in the world.

Then she was there, the stone tower rising like a mountain before her.

She punched it.

Stone shattered under her fists, not the unbending flesh of Endbringers she was used to but actual stone.

Above her, Eidolon severed a section of the edifice with a blade of crackling green energy as Superman and Supergirl rained eyebeams of fire down, carving huge swathes from the mountain of stone. Dr. Strange waved his hand, and an entire ten-meter-thick part disappeared as if it had never existed in the first place.

Even as building-sized pieces of stone rained from the sky, the Tower did not fall, held up by Bohu's power. The Endbringer didn't actually need to be connected to the stuff it manipulated, so it made no difference if they removed the support or not. From the falling pieces, spikes of rock and metal rained down on the flyers.

Glory Girl grimaced as she dodged a piece of metal the size of her leg that whirled like a saw, fist lashing out to smash another section of Bohu's body.

Then she heard the roar of lightning.

Suddenly it was there, a black and white beast clad in electricity.

The dragon ran up the Tower faster than most could blink, claws tearing huge groves in stone, metal and glass. Then it ran down again, more and more pieces of Bohu's body falling to the earth like a deadly rain that forced the attackers to dodge and weave lest they be crushed by the landslide.

More than anything else, it was luck that ended the battle quickly.

The heroes systematically destroyed Bohu from the bottom up, but it would have been a protracted battle. The Endbringer was simply too large for it to be anything, but as they searched the falling rubble for its actual body.

Then, as Glory Girl dodged a rain of jagged rocks and punched a new hole through the monster's fake body in search of the core, a slab of stone the size of a house smacked

her on the head.

She fell, shield shattered by the blow.

It would take a second for it to come back, and until then, she'd be flying defenceless against the rain of death around her. So she flew low, closer to the ground but still far enough away that she wasn't within range of an easy attack.

Her intention had been to fly right back up into the thick of the fighting, to keep searching for the core.

Instead, Victoria felt something in her head twinge. Some instinct, some sixth sense she had never felt before, told her to turn her head.

Unknown to Victoria, the seed of Haki that all who were bound to Mikael gained, planted in the rich soil of Soul Talent, and watered with so many recent near-death experiences, had germinated into the tiniest of buds.

Without any training or even knowing it existed, Victoria had no way of directing the Observation Haki anywhere useful.

All it did was give her the impulse to turn her head down instead of up.

When she looked down at the pile of fallen rubble, she didn't miraculously find an Endbringer core. All she saw was part of the Tower's feet and the stone that had fallen around.

Thankfully Victoria Dallon was a very impulsive woman.

So she punched it.

A simple punch that should have shattered the stone and dented steel instead carved only a chunk of rock from the 'feet' of the Tower.

The stone exploded around her, deadly shrapnel that shattered her shield for the second time in five seconds.

"Here!" Glory Girl shouted upwards, desperately hoping someone would hear her.

Fear filled her as she tried to fly away, knowing it was hopeless.

More stone spikes filled her vision.

Then she was in the air, passing through one of Strange's portals into the sky.

Superman blasted downward, lost to all who could not keep up with sub-light speed. He tackled the stone feet of the Tower, rendering the material into dust with the impact and flying upward with a broken, small silicone body in his grasp.

Stone tried to attack him still, but the Man of Steel would not be denied and smashed through it all.

Then Eidolon was in front of the Kryptonian, holding a glowing green sphere in his hands. Superman did not even blink as he threw Bohu into the swirling energy in a movement that spoke of years of cooperation.

As soon as it touched the green light, the Endbringer froze. For one long second, it seemed like it would live.

Then it started to stretch, like dough through a pasta maker. It unravelled into strands of material that were sucked into that small green ball.

Not even five seconds had passed between Glory Girl finding the Endbringer and its death.

That's when a magically enhanced cacophonous voice shouted at the top of its lungs so that everyone within miles could hear it.

"RUN!" Medea screamed.

And the singing started.

Author's Note:

What do you get when you give Senju Tsunade infinite life to spend with Creation Rebirth, Sage Mode, and the Life Element?

One badass bitch.

Two more chapters, I think, then an epilogue will round out volume 2. I had originally planned only one more, but all these chapters have grown larger than initially planned, so I am splitting the last one to include all that is needed.

I'll see you next week.

PS: Here are the intro songs for part 3 of volume 2 for those curious.

Probation 1: Wrong Side of Heaven, Five Finger Death Punch

Probation 2: The Old Black Rum, Great Big Sea

Probation 3: Can't Go to Hell, Sin Shake Sin

Probation 4: Ain't No Rest for the Wicked, Cage The Elephant

Probation 5: This Ship's Going Down, Aurelio Voltaire

SS 1: Blue Collar Man, Styx

Probation 6: Cruel Cruel World, Willie Nelson

SS 2: Everybody Knows, Sigrid

SS 3: Hot for Teacher, Van Halen

TRIBUNAL VI

So no wonder we're tarnished, but not like gods are so polished
They said let death be abolished, now I can not be admonished
And nothing's stoppin' my cursed fingers from grippin' my fate
I can't be sent to my grave, it isn't written that way.
No, I will not follow orders if chaos follows order
I represent the lands between, but I'm crossin' the border
I'll rest assured that the gods are not esteemed anymore
My lord, now I can see you and I have seen it before.
What if I don't wanna walk in your grace anymore
My faith is a fire, but the flame hasn't faded before
Should your cup runneth over, spare me your sympathy
My lord, you left us broken, so shed no grace on me.

I expected a few things to happen once I was in the gods' domain.

I expected an ambush, a horde of Olympians ready and waiting to try and kill me. Ares would attack me from behind, maybe try and stab me through the heart.

If the gods wanted to be more hypocritical, I could imagine some sort of staged trial. The Greeks were famous for their 'trials,' whether in myth or actual history. Would it be fair? Not even remotely. The outcome would be whatever the gods wanted it to be, right or wrong.

No matter their plans, I knew the Olympians intended me ill. They first lured me to Themyscira under false pretenses and tried to forcefully summon me to them. When that failed, they attracted Leviathan to that island, destroying it and threatening my wives' lives to draw me back and get me to them with emotional blackmail. The second they had made that choice, there was no going back.

The die had been cast.

They knew it.

I knew it.

This could only end one way.

The only question was what came between now and then.

As I said, I had certain expectations when I stepped through the gate.

I expected I would need to go full God of War, slaughtering my foes until only a few remained. From those few whose limbs I had torn from their sockets, I would extract answers. Slowly. Painfully.

Why go through all this trouble just to get me here when I was living my best life, well clear of them?

Why give up Themyscira?

Were they commanding the Endbringers?

Did Olympian blood taste different than that of Old Ones?

Where was the Stranger Endbringer?

Were they the man behind the curtain, the one leading the Hand, the 'oppressor' Ciara spoke about, or perhaps the threat to the world Valeria Richards had cautioned against before the timely arrival of Behemoth?

What was it like to have your own balls shoved down your throat?

These were the questions I needed answered.

It wouldn't be easy. Their power could range from Gwyn in the Kiln of the First Flame, to the Elden Beast, to the top ten of the universe, depending on the continuity I was in. I had no idea where they fell on that curve, but I would find out, one severed appendage at a time.

So yes, I had expectations.

I was an idiot.

Expectations are what Past-Me has to fuck over Current-Me to make Future-Me hate us both.

I should have known better than to make plans or assumptions based on situations I didn't know or control.

To put it in the framework of the lecture I gave Raven, my enemies had an unknown amount of strength, speed, and skill. They controlled the situation and had the element of surprise.

And what a surprise it was.

The gate delivering me to a council chamber of some sort came as no surprise. It was a positively massive room, easily larger than a sports stadium, more than an actual chamber. White marble pillars gleamed in the light from a billion stars as the place had no walls or roof. Nor was there a cloud in this sky.

It was as if this council room was held aloft in the sky, above the Earth and with nothing around it. Though calling it that was being generous. It looked and acted more like a courtroom.

Six enormous thrones, each the height of a skyscraper, were set in a rough circle around the center of the room, five of which were occupied by men proportional in size to their thrones. All wore armour of some kind, weapons resting beside their thrones.

The room was set up so all the thrones could see each other and look down into the middle.

I was, surprisingly, not the only man there.

Shazam, buffed up and in costume, was there besides a simple wooden chair. His face was set in an uncharacteristic frown, and he had his arms crossed as he gave me a nod of greeting.

Dr. Fate did not glance my way, eyes remaining focused on a large portal that showed the ruined island of Themyscira, rain pouring down, and the waves crashing into the Amazons.

Of more interest were the others in the room.

If I was an idiot, I would have taken them for the men of the Olympian council. Ares had explicitly said I was 'to appear before the council of Olympus.' Not 'the council of Olympians.'

I wasn't an idiot.

Ares left my side, still the same height as before, and walked to one of the enormous thrones. On it sat a man with bright red hair, clad in a white toga with golden armour underneath. Ares stood at the mountainous man's feet beside another man in armour, resting a trident over his shoulder.

Zeus was obviously the redhead Ares and Poseidon were standing next to.

Also obvious was Horus, the falcon-headed god of the sun, son of Isis, and leader of the Egyptian Pantheon after deposing Seth.

Vishnu was here, four-armed, and blue-skinned, to represent the Hindu. With an image that distinctive, it was hard not to know him immediately.

It was only my studies of foreign cultures, particularly East Asian ones, that allowed me to identify the last two giants on their thrones when others from my culture would have floundered.

Yu-Huang, the Jade Emperor, was clad in thick, blue-green armour with stylized golden dragons embroidered on it.

Izanagi-no-Mikoto, the forefather of Japanese legend, sat regally on his throne, his armour more closely resembling something a courtier would wear than a warrior, though a long, jewelled spear rested across his lap.

These were Skyfathers, the strongest gods of their pantheons, or at least some of them. I didn't see anyone who looked like Odin, so he was probably supposed to sit in the empty seat since I knew he existed in this world, thanks to Thor. Nor did I see others that the comics listed.

Personally, I thought Amaterasu would be a better fit than Izanagi, but what do I know?

Maybe it was sexism?

Or they thought 'Council of Skyfathers' sounded cooler than 'Council of Skyfathers

and one Skymother'?

Still, those five were the only ones present, despite the comics and my knowledge of mythology suggesting there were many more 'Skyfathers' out there.

There was no one from North America, such as Tezcatlipoca, from central or southern Africa, like Khonvoum, or even older and less known gods. I don't want boring ones like Zeus if I am summoned to a council of Skyfathers. Give me Anu. Give me Tengri. Give me Anguta, Altjira, or Ong Troi!

Did I care that I was in a comic-based world and thus had to settle for the Euro-centrism of its creators? Should I just be happy that they occasionally gave lip service to diversity and that the few non-mainstream gods present were the best I would get?

No! I wanted something new, damn it!

Despite this all passing through my mind in a second, I was distracting myself, and I knew it. I was spiralling much like that meeting between Death, The Company, and me.

I had expectations for a council of Olympians, and instead, I got a Council of Godheads.

I was fucked.

Time to do what I did best.

Fake it till you make it.

All eyes were on me in the few seconds it had taken me to look around the area. The five Skyfathers were content to look down on me, judging me, trying to intimidate me.

I hated that.

Anybody looking over my shoulder sent my skin crawling, it was a pet peeve of mine, but something about these towering figures looking down on me stoked my rage to even further heights.

Only I could judge myself, just as I passed no judgment on others.

But, in such unfamiliar situations, I could not give vent to my frustration. I controlled my emotions, not the other way around. I just needed to channel my frustration in the most efficient manner.

After my first quick glance around this room and under the judging gaze of everyone present, I sauntered my way toward the center between Shazam and Dr. Fate and the obvious seat I was meant to take.

I did not look at anyone. The only sound was my feet against the marble floor. My movement was unhurried, a leisurely walking pace, but I reached the center quickly.

Between the two heroes was a chair. It wasn't some sort of prison chair with manacles and chains, nor was it comparable to the ornate thrones on which the gods sat.

It was just a chair in the middle of the room. If I sat in it, everyone would be able to

look at me, and I would always have at least two of the five Godheads at my back.

I waved my hand casually.

KRAKA-THOOM!

Shazam and Dr. Fate jumped away in fright at the sudden loud sound as the chair was disintegrated by a sudden crack of lightning. The pristine floor was blackened and cracked.

The gods did not even flinch.

I continued my one-man show.

From the Bottomless Box I always carried with me, I withdrew my seat of choice for this meeting and placed it over the scorched marks on the floor.

It was no throne, ornate and gilded.

It was a simple brown recliner, one you could find in most furniture stores.

With its back to the empty throne, I threw the lever on the side, and the footrest rose, and the back fell at an angle.

A simple, highly comfortable human invention that allowed me to keep an eye on all five Skyfathers.

Let them keep their massive thrones made of stone. I will take my recliner every day. Now I just needed my cat on my lap, a good book, and a drink.

Speaking of…

"Beer?" I asked Dr. Fate as I held up a glass bottle to him, kept chilled with magic. I couldn't see his whole face thanks to his gold helmet, but the purse of his lips told me 'No.' I shrugged. "Suit yourself, but you're missing out. It's Scathach's brew." Turning to Shazam, I gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry man, I'd offer you one too, but this shouldn't be your first drink. Your mom would kill me if my wives didn't get to me first."

One didn't need to have the Wisdom of Solomon to get what I was inferring.

I knew who Billy Batson was.

I knew where he lived.

This little show I had put on told me so many things about the situation.

Clearly, I was disregarding the gods in favour of the 'mortals' and yet said gods had not attacked, even as their faces become graver with every passing second.

They wanted something from me, which gave me leverage.

It was also clear the two mortals here were only present at the gods' behest. What exactly their purpose was, I still didn't know, but they were waiting for a go-ahead before they said anything.

The Skyfathers also weren't as unified as they seemed.

My use of lightning had been a clear dig at Zeus, yet the chief Olympian had only clenched his fists, and I had caught a smirk on Yu-Huang's face. The question was whether

they were unified enough against a common threat (i.e., me) that they would put aside their disagreements.

Odin's absence was telling.

It was also clear who was hosting this little shindig.

After taking a deep sip of my beer, I looked at the only Skyfather to be accompanied by other members of their Pantheon.

"You called Zippy?" I asked Zeus casually, taking another sip.

If faking it was my useful skill, then my most used skill was pissing people off.

******

Fighting Leviathan near the ocean was impossible.

The second Endbringer was simply the single most efficient killing machine on the planet. That was what happened when you were hydrokinetic on a planet where water covers seventy percent of the world's surface.

There was water in the sea.

There was water underground.

There was water in the air.

There was water in people.

Leviathan going all out was the second greatest threat to the Family after Tohu.

There were two simple reasons for that.

Range and energy efficiency.

Leviathan had proven to be the Endbringer with the greatest range, and manipulating water was so easy that humans had learned the basics before modern dams or ships. Even some animals understood how to direct and control water in the limited forms they had.

As if it was waiting for Mikael to step through the portal, the attacks upon Themyscira intensified as soon as the man and god disappeared.

Waves, originally only tens of meters tall, swelled to hundreds of meters as they crashed over and over into the once prosperous island.

Tens of thousands of tonnes of crushing water shattered the stone, washing away all proof that this small nation, hidden in the Mediterranean, had even existed.

As the seas retreated, water giving way to land in preparation for another tsunami, the blades came.

Water, forced under thousands of Gigapascals worth of pressure and only one percent of a millimetre wide, carved through stone and flesh.

The Amazons, able to bear the force of the waves thanks to their blessings, were

helpless from the sharpest non-magical blades in the world.

Those able to fly might have made it to the clouds above the deadly seas and met the blades hidden in their dark depths.

Everyone would have died if Scathach had not been there.

As it was, only the most skilled of Amazons still survived, huddled with the three members of the Family in a Bounded Field Scathach had created by carving Primordial Runes into the little bit of stone that still remained under their feet.

What was once a proud island nation had been reduced to a few dozen women huddled on a rock smaller than a football field, cowering behind a magical barrier. New water blades or mountainous waves would crash helplessly against its shimmering protections every second.

Leviathan had yet to be seen once, content to kill them from the seas without risk to itself.

“Are you almost done,” Wonder Woman asked Robin impatiently. Her tears had been long mixed with the salty sea brine and washed away.

More tears would be shed for all the sisters she had lost later.

Now was the time for fury.

If they could but get their foe to face them.

Robin gave no answer, engaged as she was with her power and the enormous undertaking of the moment. Never had she exerted herself in this way.

“Give her time,” Scathach said calmly. She was sitting in the center of the spherical barrier she had set up, knees tucked under her and crimson spears at her side. “Rushing her will simply lead to another failure.”

Wonder Woman was going to say something to the meditating woman, likely a comment about how long it was already taking and how many had died before they had set up this safe zone, but a firm hand on her shoulder stopped her.

Turning, Wonder Woman saw her own grim face mirrored back at her.

“You should join them,” Diana explained simply with a gesture of her head toward a far side of the safe area where the other amazons gathered.

Wonder Woman swallowed her angry words and nodded, stepping away from the Elden Lords’ Consorts and towards what remained of her family.

“We have but the word of a man, his women, and of Ares! Are we to trust them over the gods that have protected us for thousands of years?” Clio urged the rest passionately. “Who saved us from the depravities of Man’s World? Who blessed us with youth and strength? What next? Are we to ask Circe for political counsel? Medusa for diplomatic advice? We must stay the course! Keep our faith! The gods have not abandoned us!”

“I don’t feel very strong right now, do you!?” Pheobe snarled at the former priestess. It was hard to fault her anger. Mala had died saving her while they carved the runes into the stone below them. The thought of her first crush and lover threatened to send more tears from Wonder Woman’s eyes. “I do not feel protected! Our sisters are dead! Our home is gone! We are trapped as rats on a sinking ship, and you would have us pray?”

“What else are we to do?” Clio snarled right back. She, too, had lost people. “As you say, we are trapped! Helpless! Made low by a beast we have never seen and cannot fight! Our only hope is to pray that the gods will forgive our failure to heed their warning.”

“We did not fail,” Wonder Woman heard her mother mutter.

Her arguing sisters quieted down to hear their Queen’s words.

Hippolyta had let them argue, staring out into the dark ocean and cloudy sky as she held her youngest daughter in her arms. This was Donna’s first authentic taste of danger outside of sparring, and Wonder Woman’s heart ached for her little sister. So many of her friends had died in the last half an hour.

Too many.

“Apologies, my Queen, but we did,” Penelope insisted. “We failed Lady Hestia when we allowed the man into our home.”

“How quick we are to forget what has just passed,” Hippolyta looked at her Oracle in censure. “Was it not you who, after weeks of silence from the gods, came to me with their order to invite the Elden Lord and his consorts to our home?”

“It was,” Penelope said, deep remorse written large across her face. “And I stand by that oracle. Lord Zeus himself spoke to me. But, to my eternal shame, I could not understand Lady Hestia’s message in time. I have doomed us all. Were I able, I would cast myself in the waters to return our fallen sisters for my failures. Should I survive this day when so many of my family have fallen, I shall accept all punishments for my failures.”

“There shall be no punishment,” Hippolyta shook her head sorrowfully. “It is not you who has failed. I simply urge you to remember. Your interpretation of our Lady’s message, do you stand by your translation of the augury?”

“I am willing to stake my life on it, my Queen. Though it took me time to decipher the message in the ashes, as they were in the old tongue I had not practiced in thousands of years, I am entirely sure of their meaning. We were to drive the Elden Lord from the island, never for him to return. Our failure to do so while he remained among us has led to this cataclysm.”

“Even had you brought me the message sooner, I would not have done such an ignominious act.” Hippolyta denied. “After inviting him into our home under false pretences, we would chase him out like a dog? I think not. The only crime we have

committed this day is our violation of sacred hospitality, more than our acceptance of a man into our midst. But, that, too, I do not believe to be the root of our doom. Your prophecy, what were Lady Hestia's exact words?"

"'The Elden Lord is to leave Themyscira, never to return.'"

"'Leave Themyscira, never to return.' That is no order to chase him from our shores. It is a warning to not let him back."

"What are you saying, Mother," Wonder Woman asked.

"I am saying the day is more dire than we know, cut off as we are from our gods and the world," Hippolyta turned to look at the stormy skies once more. "I am saying that I believe the gods were divided on how to handle the man. One side did not wish to have any part in his affairs, and the other wished for him to be in their power. I am saying I believe the Elden Lord and his consorts. This was a trap for them, and we were but part of the bait."

There was a moment of silence among the surviving Amazons as they digested the possibility of their Queen's words.

It was entirely possible.

The gods were never unified and often quarrelled, and mortals, Amazons included, were often left to try and survive the tempest.

The Trojan War was a perfect example.

"Are we sacrifices," Donna asked despondently, echoing the words Mikael had used before he stepped through the portal.

"No." Hippolyta did not even entertain the idea. "We are Amazons! We are survivors! When this is all done, we shall have answers. Until then, the gods will do what they will, and we will do what we can. And what we can do is avenge our fallen sisters!"

"I do believe that is my cue," an elegant voice interjected.

At some point, when the Amazons were discussing their fate, the three foreign women joined them.

Wonder Woman could see the sympathetic pain on the face of her dimensional counterpart and couldn't help but wonder if this was familiar to the heroine. Had her loss of home been like this? A doomed battle, where one companion after another fell?

Were all of the Elden Lord's consorts so burdened?

Was that why they were so protective of each other?

For an instant, Wonder Woman felt jealous of Diana. Not of her husband, for she was not fond of the man, knowing what she did of him. But she was jealous of the bonds the Family shared. The camaraderie. The closest she had come was her friends in the Justice League, and even then, some things simply could not be shared with men as they could

with women.

"You are prepared?" Hippolyta asked Robin, hand clenching her spear in anticipation.

"I am," the archeologist answered. "Before we begin, are you sure you do not wish to evacuate? Neither Leviathan nor the divine barriers around us can stop us from returning to our home and bringing you with us."

The Queen of the Amazons looked around at what remained of her people. Steely eyes met her gaze, unwavering and unflinching. For a moment, her eyes stopped on her youngest. Donna glared back as if daring her mother to try and get her to leave.

"We are in this till the end, it seems," Hippolyta said with fond exasperation. "Would that we left sooner, more of my sisters would have survived. Hubris has always been the downfall of men and women alike. Now, all that is left to us is vengeance."

"No," Robin denied. "All that is left is to live. No matter what."

Then she was gone in a rain of pink petals.

"Will she be all right," Wonder Woman asked her counterpart in worry. "She bears the greatest risk in this plan, and Leviathan has thwarted her attempts before."

"I would not worry about her but about yourselves," Scathach cautioned as she stood beside one of the runes carved into the stone, spear raised in preparation.

"I shall worry," Hippolyta interjected. "Not only out of concern for a woman who has aided my people but out of my concern for my people themselves. Should any of you fall in our defence, I fear what wrath your husband would bring upon us."

Diana let out a wet chuckle.

The sound was so out of place in the pouring rain, crashing waves, and gloomy atmosphere that all eyes turned to her. Much like Wonder Woman herself, her tears had been washed away. These might not have been the Amazons of her world, but the heroine knew her counterpart had been quickly forming a bond with a few, even in the short time she had spent on Themyscria.

To hear laughter from her in such a dark moment was… odd. And concerning.

"Apologies, Queen Hippolyta, I meant no offence. It is a running joke in the Family, is all."

"Then explain it to me while we wait. And why the darkest day in our history merits laughter," the Queen of the Amazons asked with a frown. Not only her, but all of the other Amazons looked at Diana in displeasure. "Or do you believe my concern about the Elden Lord's ire to be unfounded?"

"It is precisely because the day is so dark that we must laugh," Diana met her mother's gaze. "We must find what joy we can even when things are at their worst. Robin and Mikael have taught me that. Your concern is also not unfounded, as I am not blind to

my husband's tendencies. I truly meant no offence."

Hippolyta's glare softened slightly. Not much, but noticeable enough to one who had known her long enough.

"As for the joke itself, much of the context is lost without divulging secrets that are not mine to share. Robin is one of the weakest of us in one on one combat."

"She specializes in dealing with large groups of weaker enemies rather than one powerful foe," Scathach interjected with a smile. "Were we each assigned a rank based on threat, whether to an Endbringer or other singular enemies, Robin would rank tenth."

"And you find it funny that one of your 'weakest' is out facing the beast alone?" Clio asked, recrimination thick in her voice.

"No," Diana disagreed with another chuckle. "It is merely the irony of your concern. It is a hobby of Mikael and Medea to assess threats to the Family and make plans for eventualities. A type of wargaming, if you will, like we… like I did when I was young. Many factors went into that ranking, such as assuming all our abilities would be used. I will not bore you with details, as I do not know all of them myself. All I know is that, for threat assessment, I am only number three though I am the physically strongest. Raven and Ranni are both the most magically powerful, only slightly less than Mikael, yet they are more inefficient in combat, so they are ranked fourth and fifth, respectively. That might change in the coming years as Raven grows accustomed to her new… status. Power is not the be-all, end-all."

"Mikael is zero, and I am number one," Scathach said with some pride. "My skills, runes, and Noble Phantasms combine to mean I am a greater threat to almost anything, even though I am physically and magically weaker. I am simply more versatile."

"I continue to fail to understand what is so humorous," Hippolyta sighed, but there was a slight smile on her face.

It took Wonder Woman a moment to understand why, and when she did, she looked at her counterpart with renewed respect.

Diana was distracting them from the wait, the anticipation of the coming battle. It was also pulling some from their grief. She was drawing their ire so that her fellow Amazons did not psych themselves out, an act that might cost them their lives. Scathach had caught on instantly and provided aid.

Looking around subtly, Wonder Woman noticed only one or two of her sisters in arms had caught on like her mother.

Half a battle was waged with morale, and Diana was arming her side.

"The humour comes from the fact that Mikael and Medea came up with two ranking systems. The threat and survival ranks. Partially so we could all know how we currently

stacked up to each other in all-out fights, but partially to mess with us. It led to many jokes."

"Should you ever wish to spar with Artoria going all out," Scathach smirked at the Amazons, idly twirling one of her spears. "You but need to call her 'eternal second place'."

"Her competitive streak is so cute," Diana giggled. "She spent hours arguing that, even if she wasn't ranked zero, she should be at least first place on the threat ranking."

"Robin is ranked high on the survival ranking, so we need not worry. Even if she cannot defeat Leviathan, she can protect herself enough to survive," Clio nodded in understanding, but Diana shook her head, and Scathach's smirk widened.

"The premise of the 'survival ranking' was how difficult each of us would be to kill if we were taken by complete surprise and unprepared. It is murkier than threat assessment, but I am between fourth and seventh place, as is Scathach. The top three were never in contention. Number two is Artoria, number one is Mikael, and number zero is Robin."

"You've met our husband," Scathach chuckled. "I am half convinced he set up both rankings just so he could joke about 'dropping the one' for Robin."

"If everyone in our Family was using all our tools at our disposal, none of us, even working together, could defeat my husband," Diana said seriously. "But not even he can kill Nico Robin."

"Why," Donna asked.

"Because of that," Scathach gestured to the sky with a spear.

Wonder Woman looked up and saw a sky of pink.

Like leaves of a cherry blossom tree falling or petals on the breeze, the dark sky covered in black clouds was torn asunder by the tide of pink bodies. It was only thanks to her enhanced eyesight that Wonder Woman could make them out in the dark and distinguish their features.

A long, serpentine body with four limbs, each tipped with five claws. The size was difficult to estimate at this distance, but Wonder Woman thought it had to be at least as wide as a stadium and three times as long. Scales that were light pink, almost white, shone in the lightning that occasionally illuminated the stormy skies.

An Eastern dragon, Wonder Woman realized, as opposed to the more Western style of the rest of the family she had seen.

But instead of a head with whiskers or a beard, as she had always seen in depictions of Eastern dragons, a body grew from the front of each dragon. A female torso with generous proportions, crossed arms, massive bat-like wings sprouting from her shoulder blades, and pointed horns poking from long dark hair.

It was like a Demon merged with a Dragon.

And there were thousands of them.

“You might be able to kill one Flower Dragon,” Diana said. “Or two, or a hundred, or ten thousand. But so long as even one petal exists, you cannot kill Nico Robin.”

“I can understand why it took so long,” Hippolyta sighed in awe at the beautiful sight.

“The number is not the reason,” Scathach shook her hand, eyes narrowed as she watched the sea. “The trick was to form them far enough away that Leviathan could not sense their creation in time to stop them. She had to create them outside the atmosphere. Be prepared. Robin will draw the Endbringer out. It will be up to us to slay it.”

Even as they talked, the tide of Flower Dragons fell to the ocean and met a tide of water blades rushing up to meet them.

Dozens died before the first reached the ocean. Robin could not maintain a defence of Armament Haki around so many clones at once. But even if over a hundred died, that still left thousands of massive pink dragons to smash into the sea at once. Not a drop of blood fell, though. Whenever one of the dragons would take enough damage, it would simply dissipate into a flurry of pink petals.

The sound of their crashing into the sea was cacophonous and turbulent waves crashed into, over, at, through, and away from each other. The protected sphere of land was battered and smashed by dozens of waves but still held firm under the power of the Primordial Runes carved into them.

The death toll surged as Robin placed her clones in the seat of Leviathan’s power. Though none of the Family could die by drowning, water was one of the most lethal weapons on the planet. Massive pink dragons were smashed, crushed and sliced by the second.

In less time than it would take a regular person to drown, hundreds of dragons were killed, filling the ocean with millions of pink petals.

It would have been beautiful had it not meant something so horrific.

But not even Leviathan’s hydrokinesis could kill thousands of dragons in only a few seconds. And with every one that fell, the next was slightly harder to kill, Aura and Haki less spread out between so many different bodies.

Had Robin been fighting alone, Leviathan would have won. It would have slain all the clones she had prepared in a fraction of the time it took to make them. Such was the advantage the second Endbringer held by staying in the ocean.

But Robin wasn’t alone, she wasn’t trying to fight Leviathan, and she most certainly wasn’t unfamiliar with the sea.

Robin knew the ocean.

The seas and the wave had been her only constant companion as she ran from a world

that cried for her death, that declared she should never have been born.

And that ocean was far more dangerous than the one on Earth.

Thousand of eyes searched the dark waters for the serpentine form of the Endbringer. Her Semblance, Library of Ohara, was incredibly simple and effective.

It simply allowed her to process and retain information at a quicker rate, such as allowing her to act as a one-woman army to search leagues of water for one slippery eel.

Robin found it when twenty of her clones died in a whirlpool of death in an instant. It was moving incredibly quickly, but not so fast she couldn't see it with her Haki and experience sparing with Yoruichi.

Once she had the location, she set to work on the last part of the plan.

Even if she could kill Leviathan, which she could not, fighting the Endbringer in the water would be stupid.

So she needed to get it out of the water.

Fishman Karate was a fighting style that did not, in fact, control water or even rely on it.

Originally designed to take advantage of the Fishman race's strength and speed in the ocean, it remained deadly effective on land and in the hands of humans. This was because the basic principle of martial art was the propagation of force along currents and in waves of impact.

Trying to fight Leviathan with water was impossible.

Trying to fight Leviathan with currents?

That was much more easily achieved.

Especially when you had thousands of powerful limbs to help direct it.

Once Robin knew the general location of the monster, every single one of her clones started applying their power to create a massive current. More died every second, but with so many huge beasts all churning the water, it did not take long for the world's strongest current to form.

Currents could be formed by wind, temperature differences, or even tides shifting. Leviathan could ignore all water movement and swim unimpeded through even the sea's most brutal currents.

But if a current was not caused by water but a void formed by Haki-infused blows?

Leviathan was as helpless to swim through that as the weakest guppy.

The Endbringer was sucked into the sky in a vortex of water, air, and black fists.

"NOW!" Scathach shouted, driving her spear into the rune that kept them safe and trapped.

The Amazons all lept from the last battered piece of rock that was once their home

island as it was swallowed by the waves of the crashing sea.

Some could fly, others couldn't and had to rely on their more magically inclined sisters to keep them aloft, but they all knew they would never again be able to set foot upon Themyscira's shores.

Even as Leviathan flew through the air, chased by pink dragons, it was not helpless in any way.

Turning its awkward tumble into a mid-air surf, it coalesced blades of water and launched them at its surrounding enemies even as the rain turned into falling spikes.

Penelope's foot was severed as she swerved her magical platform away.

Pheobe's arm fell to the water below, unable to dodge mid-air fast enough.

Clio… did not make it, and what remained of her joined her fallen sisters in their rest in the briny depths.

Even as Leviathan dodged a punch from Donna, it was smashed in the back by one of Robin's tails and into a brutal uppercut from Hippolyta.

Half of its head shattered, falling away.

Those present had no idea about the Stranger resetting the other Endbringers or that they were lucky enough to have started this operation after it was trapped in Ranni's Diorama.

All they knew was they could finally hurt the monster that had killed so many of their friends and family.

But, so long as its core was not destroyed, no amount of damage would hinder Leviathan's operation.

Watery claws racked against Artemis' shield as the monster spun mid-air. Never having fought the Endbringer before, the Amazon was unprepared when the whip-like tail, covered in an extremely thin and sharp segment of water, bisected her from below.

Wonder Woman roared out in fury but did not strike out with her sword in the opportunity Artemis had bought with her life, for she had fought the beast before.

Instead, the Lasso of Truth was there to catch the murderous appendage, tightening around it. It was only the tip of the tail, but that was enough to halt Leviathan's momentum slightly.

Diana's Lasso caught Leviathan's left arm.

Trusting their Amazonian sisters to protect them from the blades of water and dagger-like raindrops, the two versions of Wonder Woman pulled.

They were not trying to tear the beast apart, even with their stupendous strength.

They were just holding it in place for the true killing blow.

"Stab and penetrate…Thrust and drill!"

One that could only happen if it remained within forty meters of its killer.

"Gáe Bolg Alternative!"

The barbed red spear pierced through space, through dense layers of silicon flesh, and through fate itself.

'The spear was thrust, so the heart was pierced' became something completely different.

The heart was pierced, so the spear must have been thrust.

Every drop of water within leagues froze in place.

Then the rain fell gently upon their heads.

At once jubilant in victory as it was filled with grief, a cheer rose from the survivors.

And then the sky opened.

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Even as the battle raged against Bohu, the Tower shattering piece by piece under the combined might of her sisters and the heroes of this world, Medea never took her eyes off the real threat.

Tohu was small, tiny, really. Compared to the Tower, it was barely a dot in the sky, only visible because of the clear weather. Even comparing it to Behemoth, the sixth Endbringer was minuscule. Size-wise, Medea thought it might even be smaller than Mikael.

The form was vaguely female if a woman had one pair of legs, two torsos, three faces and four arms. Unlike Behemoth, who looked to be made out of cooled obsidian, or Bohu, who built its body from stone, Tohu's entire body seemed to be formed from strands of hair that fell from its three heads and woven into ribbons and cords in the approximation of a human body.

It was far from the most disturbing sight the witch had ever seen, so she had no trouble keeping her eyes on the creature. That was why she was the only one to see the monster make its move as its 'sister' died.

The first sign was when the hair on one head turned platinum white, the bright colour woven throughout the small body as a third of its composition matched the transformed head.

As Medea saw the first of Tohu's heads transform, saw the delicate female features with high cheekbones, saw the dull silver eyes that looked out at the world with a cold and empty gaze, saw the asymmetrically placed feathered wings that sprouted from the Endbringer's back, she screamed.

“RUN!”

Her voice, magically enhanced to carry as far as possible, warned all the heroes and civilians to flee before the smallest Endbringer.

It was hard to not let the glee and sheer relief she felt leak into her shout.

She and Mikael had spent long nights coming up with plans, contingencies, and estimations about all the threats this world could throw at their Family.

Endbringers had factored surprisingly low on that scale.

Compared to people like the Sorcerer Supreme, Molecule Man, Apocalypse, Doctor Manhattan, and Mad Jim Jaspers, they were just not something they worried about. That wasn’t even factoring cosmic-level entities like the Phoenix Force, Galactus, Darkseid, the Anti-Monitor, or Trigon.

There had been one exception to that, out of known Endbringers.

Tohu.

All their discussions on Endbringers had factored in the idea that the monsters would be holding back their power, thanks to the death of the Simurgh. Ideas like Behemoth not limiting its kill range, Leviathan controlling the whole ocean, or Khonsu teleporting as much as it wanted were bandied about without any genuine concern. The Family would be able to handle it, especially if they worked together. The creature’s weakness to magic and the Defences would be able to counter almost anything the monsters could throw at them.

The smallest Endbringer had been different.

Their biggest question was what constituted ‘all out’ for the creature. Obviously, there would not be the slow ramp-up process it faced in the book. It would choose powers all at once or at least one right after the other. From there, the options differed.

Would it supercharge powers? Theoretically, if it invested an Endbringers’ worth of energy into specific powers, it could kill even Mikael’s true form or eradicate the planet.

Would it be able to control more than three powers at once? In Worm, Tohu had mitigated this limit by using Trump powers like Eidolon’s or the Faerie Queen’s. If it didn’t need to be so constrained by three powers, it could make even deadlier combinations. Sting-empowered light rays from Legend’s power, while the Endbringer cloned itself and was protected by force fields, would be a nasty and efficient combination.

Would it cycle through powers instead of sticking to only three? Even if three was the maximum it could hold at one time, if it could change them mid-fight, it would give the Endbringer unmatched versatility thanks to the thousands of options it had to choose from.

That last one would actually be worse than the previous two options. You can plan around overwhelming power or effective combinations, but you cannot plan against thousands of different powers that constantly change and combine in new ways.

In the end, Mikael and Medea had settled on two possibilities that were the worst they could think of. One was bad, and the other was almost impossible to stop.

Tohu imitating other Endbringers was the former.

So Medea sighed in relief after she shouted for the other heroes to flee. The Simurgh was much easier to deal with than Leviathan, Behemoth, the Stranger, or even Khonsu. The Family could handle the Simurgh without issues. Not only were they immune from its influence thanks to the Defences, but it perceived the world through predictions, which could not see any of them. Tohu itself, without using a power slot, perceived the world through expressions of power.

The Family might as well be invisible to the monster.

The Simurgh head started to sing as Medea rained light upon the creature. Now that the other Endbringers were dead, and it was clear it wasn't retreating, there was no point holding back from trying to take it out.

Medea's Rain of Light, her primary offensive spell, fell upon the small body of the monster that couldn't dodge an attack it could not perceive. They did damage, but only at the superficial level. It might look like it was made of hair, but Tohu's body was as tough as any of the other Endbringers.

Heroes fled below her, instinct and experience telling them to get as far away from the sounds coming from the Endbringer. The Simurgh might be dead, but the fear it instilled in the world was ever-present.

Medea continued to chip away at the small body, distracting it as best she could for the moment as she communicated with her sisters.

'I cannot help,' Glynda warned mentally, her mind heavy with strain. 'If I lose focus, this tower will fall, and everyone will die.'

Medea spared a glance downward. Glynda had already transformed into her dragon form, her purple scales glinting in the sun as she hovered in the sky before the massive mountain of rock, steel, and glass that once formed the body of the largest Endbringer. Without Bohu to keep the gigantic form stable and floating, the 'corpse' the size of Mt. Everest would have fallen to the Earth with disastrous consequences.

Glynda focused more on precision than power but still had enough juice as a dragon to keep it from impacting the ground too fast. She had to do it alone, as any hero in the song's range was more of a risk than a help.

Even in the second Medea spared, she saw the remains slowly start to descend as the former huntress tried to settle the artificial mountain in a way that wouldn't cause the world's worst rockslide.

'Yoruichi,' Medea ordered rather than lament the situation.

‘Here!’

The feline dragon smashed into the Endbringer in the sky, claws tearing wings from the body as both forms were shrouded in black and white lightning. Medea stopped her attack, knowing the Shinigami was the better choice for fighting this particular battle.

The battle may have ended there had the second head not transformed instantly. A green hood of hair covered a glassy helm as the white platinum of its body was joined by threads of green.

Eidolon.

Medea grinned.

Yoruichi continued to try and claw her way through the monster but could not penetrate the strands of hair, now made invulnerable by the second power chosen. Eidolon’s power was essentially ‘give me what I need right now.’ Invulnerability was possible, but it also wasted one of the four slots Eidolon had in this world that could have been used offensively.

The second and third slots were equally obvious when Yoruichi was forced to leap away from a blast of greenish-black energy, the same kind that had recently killed Bohu. The monster would have only been able to use that power against the black dragon if it also invested a slot in some sort of perception ability that allowed it to see the Family.

The Defences were potent, but they were not all-encompassing. Bohu had been able to sense them thanks to the tremors they made in the air around them, and Leviathan could do the same by sensing the displacement of water vapour. Tohu could have used an Eidolon slot to have eagle vision, which would be enough to see them.

More than likely, it was some enhanced dynamic senses to keep up with the speeds Yoruichi was moving.

The Family might have lost its invincibility, but Tohu was down to one Eidolon slot and one head. It could cycle Eidolon’s abilities, of course, but it would keep one for senses, one for defence, and one for attack. Anything less would be stupid.

So what was its play now? Every second it delayed was more time for the rest of the Family to gather, more time for the fleeing heroes to find safety and more time for civilians to be rescued.

Medea cast a spell to further enhance Yoruichi as she kept her eyes on the most significant threat they faced today.

That was when Priscilla’s voice echoed in the Family’s heads, paralyzing them all with panic and fear.

‘Mikael is gone!’

Yoruichi would have died, her attack stuttering to a stop and allowing Tohu to

envelop the Shinigami in that ball of green energy.

Only a quick teleportation from one of the Emoticlones saved her life.

'What do you mean?' Emma asked urgently.

Medea teleported herself further away from the monster to gain time to think.

Mikael.

Not 'Sir Bard.'

Priscilla was panicking.

That didn't change the fact that they were in a life-and-death struggle at the moment.

She reappeared half a kilometre away from the Endbringer, getting a wider look at the situation. Most of the heroes had already fled, which saved her the worry of possibly having to fight them. Even if Tohu was going all out with the Simurgh's power, it should not have been able to affect them too badly in such a short period of time.

'His body! It is gone!'

The entire premise of Mikael going off alone was that he was effectively immortal so long as his real body was safe in the Jewel.

A psychic burst of panic flooded their minds, threatening to send Medea to the ground in mental pain. Emma's terror, panic and pain almost floored them all. Medea almost instinctively raised her Mental Defence but held herself back.

That would cut her off from the Family.

The Caster knew they all cared for and loved Mikael, but Emma was something completely different than the rest of them, no matter what the relationship issues Mikael and her were having at the moment.

Ever since the mutant entered his mind for the first time in the cell, Emma had become entirely different from the woman first summoned to the Island.

Emma had fared the worst when Mikael was burning in the Kiln of the First Flame. She had been the only one to know what was happening then. However, even when the rest of the Family learned about what had happened, it had still been Emma who degenerated into almost incapacitation when he beat Dark Souls II, and they waited for Robin to be summoned in the third game.

After the first day, the mutant had not eaten a bite of food. After the second, she didn't leave her room, even when the drakes had hatched. On the fifth day, Tsunade had barged in to check on her.

Medea hadn't been there at the time, occupied with dealing with the hatchlings, but the former Hokage had emerged from the room to tell the group that the benefits of the Catalogue had prevented any sort of physical degeneracy from lack of sleep or movement.

But Medea had seen the look in Tsunade's eyes. The former ninja had been disturbed

by what she saw in that room on that day.

It was only later, after Mikael had freed himself and they landed on Earth, had Medea been able to piece the entire puzzle together by the way they acted toward each other.

Their Family was complicated on a good day, and their relationships varied from person to person. Mikael's relationship with Artoria and Diana was formed from mutual respect and admiration. Robin was pretty much Mikael but female, so they had hit it off immediately. Yoruichi and him trading teasing remarks, the doting way he was with Priscilla or the gentleness he shared with Tsunade.

They all had different relationships, different ties that bound them together, but no matter their form, their love was one of mutual affection. The love of a man and wife… or wives in this case.

Medea did not see that with the mutant.

Emma did not love Mikael as a man.

Mikael was not her husband, no matter what he claimed.

Mikael was her God.

Mikael was Emma's everything.

And like any believer in a religion, she sought to spread her belief. Emma would continue her actions, doing everything she could to 'elevate' her god, even if he told her not to.

After all, it had worked out last time. The Family was happy now, weren't they?

So Emma hadn't been wrong.

If it was just blind devotion, Mikael would have been able to nip it in the bud. Even with his ego, he was more aware of his faults than anyone else. But it wasn't her mindlessly following his orders.

Emma still retained her own will for all that she had been born from the madness of his eldritch mind. She had even joined hands with this world's version of her, whom she absolutely despised, just to prove a point to him.

That was why Mikael had so much trouble with her.

How do you convince someone you are not their everything? How do you deal with someone who went mad with love for you because you were mad with love for them?

There wasn't. Not without using a Command Seal. And Mikael would never do that.

Trapped in a limbo where Emma's plans to 'elevate' him against his wishes was a sure sign she was still free to make her own decisions but wanted nothing more than what he currently possessed.

The man wanted a wife.

The woman wanted a deity.

And that deity, the one Emma had seen every single day for over a year as she sat on her chair with a glass of wine, the one she had built a shrine to in her room, as absolute as the sun rising and as inevitable as its setting.

Was gone.

The mental anguish the Family felt as a blowback was blinding. They could all feel the loss, confusion, and pain Emma felt. They could feel it as, regardless of what she was doing or where she was, the mutant opened a portal to the Island to verify Priscilla's words.

They all felt the abyss that opened in her soul as she beheld the Island, the Jewel, but no Mikael.

Medea had to stop her before they all died at the hands of the empowered psychic and the Endbringer fighting a bird made of shadowy energy.

It was hard to think through the panic that bombarded her mind, but Medea was not a heroic spirit for nothing.

'Emma!' She mentally shouted. Medea absolutely refused to lose her Family again. Especially to blind panic. 'He's still alive! I can feel our connection through the seals!'

'Where is he?! Where is he?! Where is he?! Where is he?!'

'I don't know, but you need to calm down! Raven can't keep this up!'

Even with the boost in power thanks to absorbing Trigon, Raven's powers were highly affected by her emotions, to say nothing of her Emoticlones. Medea had no idea which one was controlling that shadowy bird, as the primary consciousness was still focusing on rescuing the millions of people trapped in the city. Still, there was no way it could keep up the defence while being psychically blasted.

Thankfully, it looked like Yoruichi had decided to raise her Defences and rejoin the fight. Her draconic body was once more under control and no longer spasming.

Medea grit her teeth in psychic pain, wishing she could do the same.

'Trust him! He won't die on us! We just need to do what we can here!' Realistically, Medea should have known that reasoning with the mad and the panicked was a hopeless endeavour, but she had to try. They couldn't fall to infighting so close to the finish line.

Panic attacks were not something someone could get over quickly. The only difference was that they could all hear Emma's internal monologue as she lost control.

'Why hasn't he summoned us? He could be trapped, sealed, in another cell. Death could do it! Maybe The Company? He needs us. I won't let him be hurt again! Where is he!?'

'Mikael will never be trapped again.'

Melina's voice did not shake from the psychic pain, nor was it panicked in the

slightest.

It was calm.

Certain.

As firm and unbending as the strongest metal in the multiverse, there was no doubt in her mind at the veracity of her words.

'If Mikael is alive, he is Free.'

Medea had a moment of realization then, as she continued to feel Emma blast them with her emotions. It took time for someone to recover from panic attacks, even as Melina's steady presence helped calm the psychic.

It was easy to forget because she was so quiet most of the time, but Melina was the woman who knew Mikael best and had been with him the longest. She knew his faults and flaws. His strength and weaknesses.

She was the opposite of Emma. Their love was that of a mortal for a mortal.

That was why her faith in him was firm.

'If Mikael is Free, and he is not Home, then woe betide whatever foe dragged the dragon from its den.'

Medea would have loved to ruminate on that nugget of realization and what it meant for the Family and her own relationships. In an ideal world, Emma would have time to calm down, and the Family could investigate what was happening with Mikael.

Reality was sometimes cruel.

They had wasted too much time.

Even half blinded by psychic panic, Medea saw the change in the third head.

"RUN!" Even as Medea shouted once more, voice heavy with panic and fear, she knew it was too late.

Yoruichi's removal of the psychic communication, necessary to keep up the battle, doomed her to be unable to respond in time.

The black dragon fell.

Tohu had made its final power choice.

The worst case had happened.

******

Unit 00 unresponsive.

Unit 01 unresponsive.

Unit 02 unresponsive.

Unit 03 unresponsive.

Unit 04 unresponsive.

Unit 05 unresponsive.

Primary Objective?

76% complete.

Most efficient selection for accomplishing Primary Objective?

Unit 03.

Transforming.

Sonic disruption to surrounding brain waves.

Local species dispersed.

Continuing operation.

Error.

Damage sustained.

Unknown source.

Emergency selection.

Designation 'Eidolon'.

Additional Asset 'Shihouin Yoruichi' interfering in Primary Objective.

Additional Asset 'Medea' interfering in Primary Objective.

Additional Asset 'Shihouin Yoruichi' threat to Unit 06.

Additional Assets in localized space.

Additional Assets threat to Primary Objective.

Primary Asset fulfilling Secondary Objective.

Lethal force authorized on Additional Assets.

Most efficient selection to accomplish Primary Objective and removal of Additional Assets?

Designation 'Flash'.

Additional Assets threat eliminated.

Primary Objective underway.

Author's Note:

This is your daily reminder that all narrators are unreliable. Mikael, Medea, the gods, the Endbringers. All of them.

Only I know what is happening, and I am not telling.

Just yet.

I hope everyone is enjoying Tribunal so far. One of the central ideas for this part was, 'If Mikael is not there, how do the other characters handle it. A play without its main actor must still go on.' The answer is they handle themselves pretty damn well. He might be the protagonist, but the world continues to spin even when he is not there. But we also get the chance to see how he has touched people, influenced and guided them, which I find is rarely touched on in fanfiction.

I have always felt that a good protagonist is with a story even when they are not present in a scene.

We had the first part of his little meeting this chapter, but the rest will have to wait for next week.

I'll see you all next week for the final chapter of Volume 2.

TRIBUNAL VII

This world is cruel, filled with endless pain
But even so, I will love you every day
No matter what I must sacrifice
I'll keep you safe. I alone will pay the price.
The shadows of those who were chosen,
The corpses of those who were discarded.
I realized that I had, growing deep inside,
A Child of Evil in my heart.
Birthed from my righteousness and all my sacrifice…
A Child of Evil made their start!

Zippy was pissed.

"Does your disrespect know no limits?" Zeus snarled at me.

"I have no limits," I smirked, taking another sip of my beer. "But I also wasn't the one to set up this little get-together. You all want something. I want to know what it is. I think our best bet is for you to tell me what that is, so I can start telling you no."

"Hey man," Shazam 'whispered' to me. In this room, everyone could hear him, so I don't know why he bothered. "Can you tone it down a bit? Me and the doctor have been trying to keep things civil. We don't want to start a fight. That will end badly. For everyone."

"Tell that to the Amazons," I gestured to the portal/scrying spell Dr. Fate kept open to Themyscria. It was an ingenious way to get around Information Defence. That only protected against remote viewing, but if someone opened a magical door between two places and made it invisible on one side, there was no reason they couldn't simply look through. It bothered me that I had no idea how long they had been doing this.

I thought I had been better since the whole 'Glory Girl Revival' incident, what with my illusions and whatnot, but clearly, I had not been paranoid enough.

…What the fuck was wrong with this world if *I* am not being paranoid enough.

On the other side portal, the Amazons were beset by waves, blades, and other water projectiles. One went down, smashed by the waves and ripped from the land into the dark water.

Dr. Fate watched it impassively, as did the gods, but I saw Shazam clench his fist and grit his teeth.

Not that I was any better.

My hand clenched tightly on my beer as I saw Diana smash a piece of stone the size of a house tossed by the waves that would have crashed into Robin.

I would just have to trust that my Family could handle themselves.

I honestly didn't think either Behemoth or Leviathan were too much of a threat to my wives specifically, but situations could change, and fear wasn't rational. Not being able to be out there, helping put down threats, was driving me spar.

But there was wisdom in Shazam's earlier words.

I needed information, and acting like a petty little shit wouldn't get it.

"You will forgive me, but I trust you all can understand my ire at being summoned in such a duplicitous manner. Whether it be the attempt earlier today or having a war god appear before me, neither situation was in keeping with proper hospitality."

Far from understanding, none of the gods even looked sympathetic. In fact, most looked more insulted than when I had called Zeus Zippy.

Except for Horus.

I had no idea how to read 'bird head' facial features.

"When gods speak, mortals need but to listen."

I stared at Yu-Huang for a second with pursed lips.

So it would be like that, would it?

"Then speak, and I will listen," I said, letting the emotions drain from my face so they couldn't see the roiling contempt I was feeling at the moment.

"We have watched thee, Mikael," Izanami spoke. To keep up appearances, I turned to look at him. He spoke like Ranni, though I knew it was in proto-Japanese, closer to when it diverged from Chinese, and my brain was just translating it to a format I could understand. "Since thy arrival on this planet, this council has kept a vigil on thy actions, lest thee become a threat to Our garden."

"Your very existence is a blow to this world's natural order," Vishnu continued without missing a beat. "Plans set into motion thousands of years ago, prophecies that must be fulfilled for the safety of this world, all were destroyed when you arrived."

"Your nature, you cannot help," Horus took up the speech. His voice flowed easily, despite the lack of lips. I bet he was one of those hen-pecked husbands. Just a feeling I got. "Your actions, you can. This realm stands upon a precipice."

"We know of your power," Yu-Huang said, but there was a mocking way he spoke, though I couldn't place why. "We know the might of your Court. Ranni. Scathach. Diana of Themyscria. Trigon's brood. Powerful consorts for a powerful faction."

"Power unchecked is a threat," Zeus proclaimed. "Power directed is a weapon. It needs must only determine who wields said weapon and against what it is brandished."

"The Council of Skyfathers has summoned you so you might right your wrongs," Vishu spoke again. "That what is lost shall never be regained. Such is the impermanence of

the world. But that which is might still be used to gain more."

"In Our magnanimity and under the council of the avatar of order and Shazam, We hath decided that thee might serve the world in the coming battle, so long as thee prove not a lowborn ingrate."

"Join us and prosper," Horus 'chirped' (heh). "Continue to act the kur, and We will drive you from Our shores as we have so many others."

"You are mighty, but you are no Pheonix. No Galactus. No Celestial. No Imperiex. No Starro the Conqueror."

"The Council of Skyfathers has protected this world for eons," Zeus picked up from Yu-Huang. "We, who have guided mankind since its infancy and protected them from the dangers of the beyond, will continue to do so. Aid us in the endeavour, or we shall be forced to deal with you as we have many other threats to this world."

Join us or die.

How refreshing.

Sure, it was couched in moralistic terms, preemptive defence, and all that, but that was what it boiled down to. Also key was the people they mentioned. Of my wives, all the ones they mentioned were those tied to the Divine or powerful entities they were aware of. There was a Scathach in comics, a Goddess from the Hyborian age, but I had felt no need to poke the divine hornet's nest.

Instead, it looked like it had come buzzing without invitation.

And they weren't just trying to recruit me, but my Family as well. Possibly why they had invited Diana to Themyscira, to try and coerce her to join as well.

That was before they sicced an Endbringer on the island.

Suddenly I felt nostalgic for Trigon.

I bet he would have taken a beer.

"I am not opposed to working to defend the earth," I answered, keeping my emotions from my face.

I wasn't even lying. So long as I was in this dimension, the Earth was my home. It's where I kept my stuff, and there were a few people I liked here.

"Great!" Shazam said quickly. "Easily settled. We're all on the same side! Now if your Radiencies don't mind, I am just going to go help."

It honestly did look like Shazam was about to fly through the portal to help.

Zeus held up a hand.

"Hold, Champion. We have not dismissed you yet. Neither has an answer been given." Shazam looked frustratedly between the attack on Themyscira and the god but eventually took a deep breath and bowed.

“Apologies for my haste,” he said, putting that Wisdom of Solomon to good use. “The duty I have been entrusted with, protecting the world and its inhabitants, is very important to me.”

“Your devotion to your cause does you justice, Champion,” Horus answered. “But there is no greater threat on Earth than the one before you now. Until it is addressed, the planet will never be safe.”

“The Tools will be repelled, as they have been before,” Vishnu told the still-concerned hero.

Shazam didn’t look happy but kept his mouth shut for the moment.

It helped that the portal showed that the Amazons had retreated behind a barrier Scathach had made and were no longer in imminent danger.

That, and the brief break in my role in the discussion, allowed me to clear my head a little.

“Look at Trigon,” I started, and all eyes returned to me. “Or Doomsday. I’ve already defended the Earth.”

“Your consorts felled the Ultimate,” Horus pointed out. “You only provided the weapon.”

“And thy usurpation of the Lord of Madness is more a mark against thee, than proof of thy virtue,” Izanagi waived my point away.

“You act only when your women bid you,” Yu-Huang sneered. “And should they bid you destroy? What guarantee have we that you will not fall prey to their honeyed words?”

I had to blink at that one. A lot to unpack there. Was he being sexist or just disappointed I was ‘whipped?’

It could go either way, knowing what I did of Chinese mythology.

To be fair, no god in this room came from a society historically known for their equal treatment of women.

It didn’t matter, though. There would always be those who thought a man doing things for the women he loved made them ‘weak’ or some bullshit.

Ultimately, I didn’t care if someone was misogynistic, misandristic, or misanthropic. Someone could be a rampant mass murderer, and I would still not give a shit if it didn’t involve me or mine.

But these bastards had done so.

I mentally counted down, calming myself once more.

“Guarantee?” I asked.

Depending on what they asked for, I might just give it to them for the moment.

Even if Rule Breaker didn’t work on Divine Constructs, no magical contract could hold

me, no matter how powerful.

I could make whatever promises they wanted, go kick some Endbringer ass, and then get revenge later.

My revenge wouldn't be quick, in either sense of the word, but I was a patient man by nature.

And, when I wasn't surrounded by a handful of the most powerful being on this planet, I would have enough time to get… creative with what I'd do to them.

So long as the price wasn't egregious, I could play along for a while.

But the gods were not the only ones in the room with me.

"Trust not its word nor its promise," Dr. Fate spoke up, not taking his eyes off his portal. "It may not be a Lord of Chaos, but its nature is not so far removed from them. They have ways around any deal or contract. Be it in letter or in spirit."

"You have cautioned before, Avatar of Order," Vishnu rumbled. I got the feeling the gods didn't like to be told to 'be careful'. "We do not fear the beast. But its use cannot be overlooked in the coming war."

I didn't even blink as he casually mentioned 'using' me.

"What sort of guarantee are we talking about here?" I pressed.

"A token of your commitment, a symbol of your word to defend this world," Yu-Huang rumbled.

"A sacrifice and offering," Zeus added. "Actions speak louder than any promise or contract."

I was getting fed up with the lack of straight answers here, but thankfully I wasn't the only one.

"Your sword," Ares declared simply, getting glares from the gods, but he was unrepentant. "They want your sword."

"Thy whelp continues to be ever the rebellious son, We see," Izanagi mocked Zeus. "At least thy brother knows to hold tongue."

As much as I wanted to see them descend into bickering, I still needed some clarification.

"Which sword?" I had a good idea of which one they were talking about, but I wanted to make sure.

I had a lot of blades, some meaning more to me than others. A peril of having fought for so long. If they just wanted a symbolic sacrifice of a powerful weapon, I had a few boss weapons that didn't mean much to me that I could give up without too much remorse.

"THE Sword," Horus almost spat the word. Which was impressive considering he was, again, a bird head with no lips. "The one which slew The Ultimate."

The Godslaying Blade.

The one I had lent Diana to kill Doomsday.

“Why that one in particular? I have other weapons, just as powerful,” I asked, wondering if I had ever actually used its name in a public setting. I thought I had been pretty careful about that.

“That blade is an accursed abomination,” Yu-Huang said, his disgust for me deepening as he spoke. “A foul instrument of evil. Its very existence goes against the Will of Heaven.”

“We had called the Avatar of Order to speak with Us about you,” Vishnu continued. “Despite his misgivings and your destruction of all prophecies, he spoke in your favour. Your mercy to the defenders of this world when you could have slain them and your removal of one of the Enemy’s Tools heightened your use in Our eyes. But using such a profane weapon cannot be tolerated, even should it be turned upon the foes of this world.”

“A sacrifice,” Zeus repeated. It didn’t look like any of them would take no for an answer. “One to rid the world of something so foul. And a show of commitment.”

“Hmm,” I made a show of humming in thought, which they didn’t like. I get the feeling most people either said yes to these guys or were quickly smitten. Instant gratification for the win. “Before I make any promises, I have a few questions.”

“You would dare?”

I didn’t know what had affronted the Chinese god and, to a lesser extent, the others. That I would ask questions? That I could possibly say no? That I wasn’t brain dead enough to enter an agreement for who knows how long to fight who knows what?

There was something off about this whole situation, and not just their willingness to throw the Amazons under the bus to get me.

It was like we were operating in two different worlds.

Yes, I probably couldn’t take a whole council of Skyfathers together on top of Dr. Fate, Shazam and two powerful Olympians, but neither were they in a position to threaten me.

As far as they should be aware, I was not only immortal but could also make myself completely intangible to them if I wanted to run away, so how would they hurt me?

Unless I kept the conversation going, I wouldn’t find out anything.

“Would you rather an ignorant soldier or an educated general?” I asked rhetorically.

There was a beat of silence, and I thought the gods would attack me.

Seriously, no chill.

Dr. Fate surprisingly spoke up.

“There is wisdom in his words,” the helmeted mage told the gods softly, and they slightly relaxed as he continued. “Allow me, your Radiencies.”

“We give you permission, Avatar of Order.”

“Of course.” Rather than take affront to Horus’ curt words, one of the world’s greatest Sorcerers gave me a Ted Talk. “Some thirty years ago, the population of Supers worldwide started to grow. While this was concurrent with the rise in the mutant population, that only accounted for a fraction of the numbers.”

“The Entities,” I said, and Dr. Fate tilted his head. “Sorry, it’s just the name I know them as. Strange called them Worms.”

“A not incorrect translation of their name given by the Shi’ar,” Dr. Fate nodded. “The literal meaning is ‘pest that rots from within,’ but I can see why shortening it would behoove easy use. No matter what you call them, the fact remains that they are vermin and parasites of a multidimensional nature. Giving power then harvesting the local species.”

“How’d they get to earth, or an alternate version of it at least, if you guys were defending it?” I asked, and the gods bristled. Dr. Fate forestalled anything they would say.

“It is not the duty of the Council of Skyfathers to protect worlds upon which there is no life. They entrusted the duty of investigating the pests to the Sorcerer Supreme of the time. She returned with findings indicating they were not a threat. The way the weaves of fate were changing was of more concern, and the Council let them be. Prophets the world over, divine or mystic, all started warning about impending doom.”

“Isn’t that like Tuesday for you guys? Hell, I’ve only been here a few months and already dealt with Doomsday and Trigon, if we are not counting the Endbringers.”

“Trigon, a Demon Lord who had conquered multiple realities, had two, perhaps three, prophesies foretelling his arrival,” Dr. Fate said seriously. “Every prophet who could peer into the weave, regardless of race, religion, or belief, felt the coming apocalypse. Even those from other planets. Be they a street hustler reading palms, to the greatest of Oracles, none were spared the vision of the end that was approaching this world.”

“From the Worms?” I asked, seriously doubting that. “As far as I knew, they were the multidimensional equivalent of cavemen with laser guns. Power but no creativity. A threat but only for those unprepared.” Then again, I could be wrong. This was a different reality, after all.

“As if the vermin would pose a threat to Us.” Izanagi scoffed.

“No,” Dr. Fate continued. “Their arrival simply coincides with the first of the prophecies. They were brain-dead husks, little more than bodies automatically creating more ‘Supers’ to feed a cycle that would never go on. The Council allowed them to live to increase the defenders of this world. Before your arrival, all prophecies indicated that the Earth needed as many heroes as it could produce to survive.”

“But the Endbringers are their creations,” I pointed out, just as I had to Strange.

“Yes,” Dr. Fate nodded with a grimace. “We had been… unaware of that fact until you brought that fact up to Dr. Strange. That is one of the reasons I speak now in your favour. For all that your nature invites disorder, your actions have been largely directed to the preservation of Order rather than its ruin. Once Strange told me of their origins, I set out to the empty version of Earth the Ancient One claimed to hold the two beings. I found nothing.”

I wish I could say I was surprised, but I wasn’t. Ever since I had considered the possibility of a Stranger Endbringer, I had accepted that there was no way the Entities were as braid dead as Strange claimed. You do not put much thought into a contingency if you are working on autopilot.

“Signs pointed to their long inhabitation of the planet, and my spells proved they had lain there for decades, but I found no indication they had been there in years.”

“So they had been there,” I verified, and Dr. Fate nodded. “Did they heal and leave for another dimensional version of Earth?”

It wasn’t impossible. Eden in Worm had been in the process of healing when Contessa had put a stop to it thanks to her Path to Victory. But for the Ancient One to miss something like that?

“It is possible but unlikely. I was unable to track them down, which indicates a grasp of magic such creatures lack. More likely, something or someone found the creatures and bent them to purpose. Six years ago, in all probability, when the Endbringers first appeared.”

“And you believe whoever or whatever did so is the doom your prophets foretold before I arrived, which means you are starting recruitment in earnest.” Things were starting to come together now, at least a few things. But that still left unanswered questions. “What about Leviathan? How did you get it to attack Themyscira if it belongs to this enemy?”

“One man’s Tool, even belonging to the Enemy, may be used for other purposes. Though the beast is of great power, the seas remain Poseidon’s domain,” Zeus said plainly as if the answer should be obvious. “The creatures react violently when disturbed. He only needed to agitate it and lead it to the island.”

“But why?” I asked, tapping a finger impatiently. “Why kill the Amazons? Why this blackmail style? Why the lies and false pretenses? I would have been happy to talk if you had just asked.”

“Gods do not ask, they declare.”

“Mortals need only heed their protector’s, their Gods’ will.”

“When they defy that will, they are punished.”

“This Council, in Our wisdom, conveyed Our will to the women of Themyscira.”

“The Amazons failed me, and so judgment was rendered. Should they survive the beast, they will have proven their might and dedication. I shall again render them my protection for their faith at that time.”

There it was.

The simple truth that I had been struggling to puzzle out this entire time.

Perhaps it was who I had always been, perhaps it was my knowledge of comic books, or maybe my time in Soulsborne worlds, facing the likes of Gwyn, the Elden Beast, or the Moon Presence, but I simply did not see gods as anything different than anything or anyone else.

I saw gods as merely more powerful beings than normal mortals. Their lack of aging wasn’t uncommon, nor were they necessarily more powerful than some Supers. They were just a race, one that could make mistakes, fight, and die.

The End came for everyone, Amazon, God, or Dragon. There was no escaping it. Everything that had a beginning had an end. Whether it was at the hand of some nebulous prophecized doom, when someone more powerful killed you, or when the multi-verse ended.

At the end of the game, the king and the pawn returned to the same box.

Each of the five gods upon thrones, and the two at the base of Zeus’, did not see anything wrong with the treatment of the Amazons. They were simply subjects that defied orders and were punished for it.

Hippolyta had stood up to me, even when I had threatened her, for the sake of her people and her belief. She had, in her own way, been protecting the gods from themselves.

A loyal dog, to the end.

I had respected that, even if I hated it, and, combined with the desire to keep Diana happy, I had left Themyscira without a fight.

And her wisdom had been betrayed by the very beings she had sought to protect.

Whether I agreed to this deal or not, I do not think these beings ever considered I could kill them.

Sure, they were trying to recruit me, but like the Amazons before me, I was simply another mortal. Powerful enough to warrant caution, but not an actual threat.

In some twisted way, I could see why they would think that.

I do not think they were lying about their defence of Earth. Dr. Fate and Shazam would not be here, listening to their dismissal at the loss of lives with a frown and tightened fists, if the Council of Skyfathers was not essential protectors for the planet in a universe so dangerous.

I wasn't the Pheonix, Galaticus, or any of the other threats they had mentioned.

I wasn't a god, a hero, or a monster, even if my actions and powers could qualify me as any of the three.

I was simply me.

That is all I had ever desired to be.

Free to be me.

Just a few final questions, and I could let go.

"Earlier, you said I was the greatest threat. Why? Wouldn't this 'enemy' be it instead?"

"An external enemy is less a threat than a duplicitous ally."

I didn't actually disagree with that idea, but I looked around for a more convincing answer than the one Yu-Huang gave me.

He didn't appreciate my dismissal but held his tongue when Zeus answered as well.

"All oracles agreed. So long as the defenders of Earth stood ready, and the heroes of this world grew in number and power, the enemy would be vanquished as so many had before."

"And I messed that prophecy up by showing up," I nodded. A prophecy was great when it predicted victory, even if it came at a cost. A gift of morale, if nothing else.

I was down to my last few questions.

Asking about the Stranger Endbringer wouldn't do anything since if they knew, Shazam and Dr. Fate would as well.

What about the other threats that have been facing my Family?

"You have watched me for a while, right? Do you guys know anything about the Hand, who orchestrated the theft at the Sanctum Sanctorum, or anything at all about who has been targeting my Family?"

"Of what do you speak?" Horus asked. Maybe with a frown? Maybe with a glare? Who knows.

"I know of what he asks, your Randiencies," Dr. Fate answered in my stead, then turned to me. "It has been through me that we have watched you from your appearance in Australia to today. We have been observing every time you leave your home, judging whether you will be a threat to this world. We have no knowledge of any foe of yours that you do not."

So they found me based on appearance and likely didn't know about all the times I had left on dates with the girls under an illusion. Good to know.

"ENOUGH!" Zeus ponded two fists onto his throne's armrest. "You have delayed enough! Give us your answer and the blade, or you shall be judged."

"Two more questions, and I will," I said, my emotions still not showing on my face.

“One of them is pertaining to the deal itself. What is the deal with the empty throne? I do not want to make a deal if it will not be honoured by someone who isn’t present.”

The five gods grimaced, and I got the feeling it was the subject of annoyance for them all.

“Odin is… occupied,” Vishnu said delicately. “His eldest is ever the problem child, unwilling to remain away from the mortal realm for long. But should you give your word, he will abide by this Council’s ruling.”

That wiley old goat.

Whether I agreed to the deal or not, I wouldn’t be happy. By using his son as an excuse, he had managed to stay out of the way of any fallout from this debacle.

Odin had always been one of the wisest of gods.

“Just the one question left then,” I said and turned, not to the thrones but to the one person in this room who hadn’t said a single word this entire time. “Poseidon. What happened to Atlantis?”

“I do not know, nor do I care.” The voice was flat, completely apathetic.

Zeus gave his brother a questioning look but decided I was the more pressing topic.

“We have tolerated your whim and answered your questions. Sacrifice the blade and join us, or face the Council of Godheads! Choose!”

I remained reclining in my chair, but I withdrew the Godslaying Blade.

It was a straight sword, simple in design, unlike most of my other weapons. If one looked closely, one could see its blade was made of stone, but it glistened like metal. Golden runes, faint to all but the most discerning, flickered in and out of existence along its blade.

There was a weight to the blade despite its relatively small size.

This was a weapon with a history, with power.

Forged from the body of an Elden Lord and the Elden Rune, this sword had slain a God.

The reactions were immediate.

Ares’ sword was drawn in an instant. All the gods upon their thrones tightened their fists or grasped their weapons. Shazam took a step back, but that was all.

Poseidon did not even blink.

The most violent reaction came from, perhaps unsurprisingly, Dr. Fate.

“What have you done!?” Whatever goodwill that had existed between us that meant the mage spoke in my defence seemed to have disappeared as he stared, wide-eyed in horror, at my sword. His voice, ordinarily dignified and coming in controlled cantor, was high and reedy. “What blasphemy have you wrought!”

“Do you know what this sword is called?” I asked softly as I ran a finger along its edge, ignoring the shock. My voice was conversational, devoid of all the emotion as it had been for a while.

I knew why Fate was so horrified by it, even compared to the gods.

“The Godslaying Blade,” Shazam answered, looking between me, my sword, and the good doctor who had placed the portal between him and me as if as a shield. “You called it that when you gave it to your Wonder Woman to kill Doomsday.”

So that’s where they heard it.

To think, all this was caused by a sword that the world would have never known about if Artoria and Diana hadn’t stepped forward. If I hadn’t promised to support them no matter what, maybe the gods would have been content to leave me be if I didn’t have this sword.

If they were not scared, maybe this wouldn’t have happened.

Fear was a powerful motivator, and without it, who knows what could have been.

It always amazed me how little things could set off a chain of events with massive repercussions.

One night, and one Family conversation, had set dominoes into motion to change the world.

“Did you know it was made by a mortal?” I asked rhetorically. “At the behest of a goddess? Well, that is not strictly true. She didn’t ask for this sword to be made. She forced it into existence by trapping the blacksmith, chaining him to a wall, and forcing her orders, her will, into his mind and soul.”

“No wonder it feels like that,” Shazam nodded, eyes settling warily on the blade. “He must have hated it.”

“He didn’t,” I corrected. “Though he was forced to make it for her, and it killed the god she wanted to kill, he did not hate the sword. Because he made it for me. I provided the materials, and my hand was the one that swung it. Neither of us can hate our creation. He poured everything into it. His memories. His hopes. His dreams. His wish was for a better future for the woman who called a daughter. His faith in the man he called his Lord. Everything but his life was poured into the Godslaying Blade, and only because he needed to live to give it to me. There was no hatred in that act.”

Though Marika had ordered the task, Hewg had made it his own. Just as Melina had done the task assigned her, not because it was her purpose, but of her own will.

The gods had been correct about one thing. Too often, mortals were forced to make the most in the wake of the gods’ will.

Control what you can, that is where we can find freedom. Even if the only thing you

can control is yourself.

Melina and Hewg had been free, in their own way.

“Then why is it so vile!?”

“The hatred comes from the materials themselves,” I continued, fingers trailing over stony crags. “A previous Elden Lord, abandoned by its god, lived beyond time and space before I slew it. Do you know what an Elden Lord is? What this world has been calling me for months? What it really means?”

I had already sunken deep within myself, but I was going further, leaving the memories behind for the moment. The mask, the front I had put up to the world, was peeling away layer by layer. I was holding onto its last remnants, skin-thin protection. Just enough to keep my plan going strong.

It left me feeling wistful, nostalgic even, for when the mask was not needed.

When I formed connections with people.

When I had been human, if not in race, then in mind.

When I had not given up so much to be Free.

“Someone who had claimed the Elden Ring,” Shazam answered again. I got the feeling everyone else wasn’t talking because they were waiting to kill me if I didn’t hand over the sword. The gods had their weapons in hand and were poised to strike. “You explained as much after the Doomsday fight. It is the golden rings in the blue moon, is it not?”

Of all the blessings Shazam had received, be it strength, stamina, speed, or power, I envied only the Courage of Achilies and the Wisdom of Solomon.

There was a reason the two mental blessings came from mortals and not gods.

“An Elden Lord is nothing more or less than a form of high priest,” I answered. “The holder of the blessing of the Elden Ring empowered to carry out its will by the chosen god of the Elden Beast. I used the body of a previous Elden Lord as the material for this sword, then I killed both the chosen goddess, Marika the Eternal, and the Elden Beast.”

I looked at all the gods in turn, seeing how my words disturbed and disgusted them.

“To anyone not involved in the divine, it is just a powerful sword. One that deals wounds that do not heal. To you all? It must feel like everything you hate, all rolled into one. It would be as if I killed your high priests, turned their bodies into weapons, then killed you and followed it by slaying your progenitors with it. Nuwa, Chaos, the Trimurti, Atum, or Amenominakanushi and Kunitokotachi. The weakest of creatures, laying low the most powerful. A complete reversal of the natural Order.”

That had been one of the basic principles of the Soulsborne games that I had fallen in love with.

The most wretched, pitiful, weak, and lowly creatures could eventually kill even gods

through their willpower alone.

The Godslaying Blade was that idea shaped into form.

I held it out, handle first, to Shazam.

His face was sombre as he grasped the hilt.

I didn't let it go, even when he tried to pull it from me, and the blade split my palms.

"No gods were involved in its creation, even if he would have been forced to make it anyway. Just two mortals. Do you know why?" I yanked the hero towards me, blade cutting me to the bone as I leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "Because gods are unnecessary."

Even after everything Gwyn had put me through, Marika had put Hewg through, and everything the Council of Skyfathers had done, I still did not hate gods.

To hate things, you have to care about them in the first place.

Gods might have been necessary at some point. Either as made-up constructs that humans used as allegories to make sense of the world or as real creatures with powers that had served to guide infant humanity in a cold, ambivalent universe.

Either way, they might once have been necessary, but they were not anymore.

Humanity had moved past needing a parent to protect them and was ready to stand on its own two feet. To deal with the good and the bad that came its way. If a god chose to accept that the world had moved on, to change from a controlling dictator into a comrade, I would even admire them.

I didn't hate gods.

I hated people who refused to change, grow, and learn.

Before today, I hated Hippolyta more than I did Zeus, for she had refused to grow in three millennia of life.

Now? I hated everyone in this room for what they did, represented, and would do.

Well, almost everyone.

My hand laid upon Shazam's shoulder, and he disappeared from Olympus.

My Element could only work under two conditions. I had to be touching them, and they had to want to be Free of whatever I wanted to free them from.

The ocean as a whole, governed by the Parlament of Waves, wanted to be trash free.

Rhino wanted out of his suit.

And Shazam wanted to leave to help the world.

I didn't know where he ended up. I couldn't control that. All I know is that he was Free.

And that Ares had appeared behind me, separating my head from my neck in one swift, smooth motion of his sword as soon as the hero had disappeared.

I fell, blood splattering the white marble floor, my chair, and the Godslaying Blade. The god of war sheathed his weapon and bent down to pick up mine.

"Well done, my son," Zeus said with a grin. "The lizard was too talkative. Bring me the blade."

This was enough, right?

"Hold!" Vishnu ordered. "We must destroy it, here and now. The longer it exists, the greater the possibility the Enemy will steal and use it against Us."

The mask had stayed on for long enough, right?

"And how shall We do that? You feel its foul taint and power."

I could let go, right?

"I am aware of its risk," Zeus answered Yu-Huang. "I shall have Hephastos shatter it in his forge."

None of *Mine* were here.

"Nay," Izanagi shook his head behind his fan. "Should some fiend gather the pieces to forge it anew? Have Our daughter melt it in her sun's fire."

No civilians they would care about either.

"And risk your son getting his hands on it? Or have you forgotten the trouble he and your people caused mine? No. We destroy it here and now!" Yu-Huang insisted.

It was just me, Dr. Fate, Ares, Poseidon, and the five arguing Skyfathers.

"If I may, your Radiencies? I should be able to seal it until we can bring in a party we can all agree is trustworthy enough to destroy the abomination."

I let go.

The human mind I had built using the memories engraved in my skull by my Life Element receded.

In its place was something *Greater*.

Ares died covered in his own divine blood, Godslaying Blade separating his head from his shoulders as tentacles held him firm.

The barbs and blades like fins that covered me flittered with joy at the offering of godly ichor.

The gods, one and all, flinched at the sight of me.

I knew I wasn't pretty.

This was not the chibi Cthulu form I had adopted after failing to gain a human body.

This was the body I had inhabited for over thirty-five million years. A child Great One, once only a single worm-like tentacle with tiny feelers, had grown into a true monstrosity.

My body… wasn't.

Oh, I still had a body and still bled, but I was no longer bound to liminal space, human limits, or even the laws of physics. My body flowed into, over, and through itself in rivulets of pale white flesh. Tentacles, tipped with blades and hooks, writhed in and out of reality, and I saw the world from a thousand, thousand eyes. Some were visible, dotting my limbs or blinking into and out of existence like pinpricks of light.

Many more were not. Metaphysical things that only existed in my mind.

I wasn't fully grown as a Great One, but even the gods flinched at the sight of me.

Half my body disappeared, shorn off by a blade of water.

It grew back in the blink of a thousand eyes, my Faith in myself guiding Miracles powered by a well that would never run dry.

I teleported behind the god, but he was prepared. Poseidon's trident severed the first dozen limbs that sought to constrain him, but they regrew around the weapon, enclosing it in supernaturally tough flesh.

I laughed, a wet, blood-filled, and mad laugh as the Godslaying Blade emerged from my flesh, guided by limbs not even H.R. Giger could dream of, and impaled the sea god in the eye socket, showering me with gore.

Then my laugh stopped, and it was my turn to flinch as Poseidon died.

That wasn't right.

The derailment of my plan, and my surprise, cost me.

Barely an eye blink had passed since I had killed Ares, and already the Skyfathers had recovered from their shock.

The Heavenly Jeweled Spear pierced my core, sending limbs flying in pieces.

Yu-Huang's jiao diced me into giblets.

Vishnu's four clenched fists tore me to shreds.

Horus' fire scorched me to ashes.

Zeus's lightning bolts fried every part of me that existed in reality, a constant bombardment of energy, sound, heat, and pain.

Had I been in my human body, my avatar would have perished.

I wasn't, and my Great One body was only half real, *half Dream*.

No matter what they did to me physically, the part of me that existed on this plane would only regenerate from the part of the Dream. I would not be slain until they started attacking me with conceptual attacks or from within my own Dream.

My Life element was so against confining this form, as horrific and mind-shattering as it was, to a human body because of how vulnerable it made me.

My flesh reknit around the spear.

Giblets squirmed back together into new limbs.

The bloody tentacles in Vishnu's grasp writhed and wriggled, trying to strangle him.

Horus and Zeus's attacks, which had rendered me unto nothing in this reality, were met with a rain of stars from beyond time and space. Light in the darkness squeezed into and through eyes that did not exist, into a beam that sought to sever divine limbs.

No words were exchanged, no witty banter or puns.

Not from me and not from any of the gods that were tearing me to pieces.

None of my attacks worked.

Not against the Skyfathers in the seat of their power.

Spells were weathered, blades were broken, and the Godslaying Blade was avoided with literal godspeed.

Against one of them, I'd like to think I was tricky enough I could have taken them out.

Against five? It was a fight I was destined to lose.

But fuck destiny. I made my own.

So we kept fighting, and I kept losing and regenerating.

I do not know for how long, though it could have gone on forever if the Skyfathers never found a way to permanently kill me. They seemed to be in no rush, though. For all their power, they were content to keep destroying me repeatedly, likely hoping I would just give up and die.

I think that had been their plan from the very start since I was, by my own words, immortal so long as I willed it.

Break my will, and even an immortal will die.

They didn't know me very well.

I would never go hollow.

It was Dr. Fate who broke the stalemate.

After watching the fight, occasionally throwing in the odd spell that destroyed more of me or trying to trap me, which I just ignored since nothing could hold me, he had been largely passive. A trickle of blood dripped from his nose, a sign that not even an Avatar of Order could look at my form and not face the consequences.

I do not know if he had simply given up or if it was a contingency he had already planned, and that is why he had kept the portal open all along.

All I knew was that I froze when I heard his voice and saw what he was doing.

It didn't mean much, seeing as I was still losing and just focusing on regenerating until I got my chance.

"Wonder Woman!" He called through the portal he had expanded. Through a thousand eyes, I could see what was left of the Amazons, battered, bloody, and wet, standing on the back of a familiar pink dragon. I had no lungs, or I would have breathed a

sigh of relief at the sight of Robin, Scathach, and my Diana all alive and well. “Look at it! How do we slay the monster the Elden Lord has become?”

The amazons that survived cried in pain at the sight of me, leaving only four women not holding their heads.

It was a good plan, all things considered.

I had no control over what Wonder Woman’s Insight gave her. For all I knew, it would tell her everything there was to know about me, such as that if they really wanted to kill me, they would need to ignore my Avatar, grab their pantheons, and go wrath of god on my body.

If they did, I would have no choice but to flee this reality. Not even my actual body would be able to keep up with every god of the Earth trying to kill me.

It had also unintentionally put me in a bad position.

There was one woman with the will and the means to stop me.

Dr. Fate was the spell caster, so when Scathach tried to launch a spear through the portal, he simply willed it to a new location.

My eyes, most of them at least, were only for my wives.

Robin’s arms were crossed, and she seemed to be concentrating.

Line of sight was her requirement, not distance, but I am unsure if that still counted from a separate dimension.

Diana, my Diana, was staring at the monster I had become with wide eyes.

Zeus’s lighting casually annihilated more of me, but thirty-seven new tentacles grew and shot lightning right back.

I let the mask come back, dredging up the memories that served as its base from the recesses of my mind.

“Hello, dears,” I said conversationally, my voice echoing from everywhere and nowhere. “How’d it go?”

I had never wanted any of them to ever see me like this.

I had always wanted to put my best foot forward for them, metaphorically speaking.

Falling in love is easy. Keeping that love is a constant effort, one I was happy to work at every day.

“It was an interesting challenge, more dredging the beast from the depths than the actual battle,” Scathach replied just as casually, spear over one shoulder as her crimson eyes scanned my situation. “I am jealous. Had I known your battle would be like that, I would have joined you and let Raven have the serpent.”

“She’s keeping the others safe,” I answered, not caring that Horus had rendered all my existing body to less than ashes in the wind. I simply regrew it from the void between

space and Dream. “The plan changed a bit, as you can see, but I have everything perfectly under control.” Vishnu’s fists shattered space, rendering me into a bloody paste. From the Dream, it regrew. “Temporary setback is all.”

“Clearly,” Robin said with a wry smile, letting her arms fall to her side. No luck in getting to this dimension, it seemed. “How did you piss them off?”

“Wonder Woman!”

“I’m trying!”

“I’m innocent, I swear!” I said, ignoring the struggling heroine and the mage who kept trying to get me to shut up with spells. It obviously wasn’t working. “They wanted my stuff, gave me the whole join or die speech and everything! I’m just a poor, misunderstood squidboi. See how I wiggle?”

I summoned a tentacle, one of the cute ones I knew they loved to fiddle with, not the horrific abominations of blood, blade, and eyes currently fighting the gods. I made it wiggle, doing a little wave, and Robin giggled. Yu-Huang sent a wave of sword energy, and it disintegrated.

“How rude!”

“Die abomination!”

“No, I don’t think I will,” I said haughtily as I tried to impale Izanagi with the Godslaying Blade from behind. He dodged. How rude. “I’ll have you know, chicks dig the consentacles! Maybe you should try it sometime. Then your wife might have returned with you instead of preferring to stay dead. How bad were you in bed, anyway?”

His scream of rage was music in my ears.

Maybe letting go of the mask wasn’t worth the power it gave me if it meant I missed out on the trash talk.

“Mikael. What happened?”

Her voice wasn’t loud, accusatory, or even angry, but Diana stopped my next dig in its tracks.

One word.

That was all it would take to stop me from fighting her god.

One word.

Barring unavoidable accidents or deliberate tests, my wives had been excellent about not using language that triggered their control of my avatars. I appreciated it, I really did, but I always remembered the chain around my neck and the power they could wield over me.

“Your husband,” Zeus answered before me, spitting the words in disgust. “Turned into this disgusting thing and killed both Ares and Poseidon. Though we offered terms to join

us in the Earth's defence, it spat in our faces and sought to unmake all. I call on you, daughter of mine from a foreign world, to join us to raise your blade against it for the good of all who live."

Diana looked to this world's version of her father, to the version of her mother on the ground clutching her head and moaning in pain, back to my monstrous form.

I didn't say a word.

Nothing Zeus had said was wrong.

Strictly speaking, they weren't morally right, as they had fucked over the Amazons, but if one were looking at the greater good, I should have joined them. It would have eased tensions, and we could have worked together against this shadowing 'enemy' that had control of the entities.

By fighting, no matter who won, the Earth would be weaker for it.

A hero would have put the greater good over their petty vengeance.

I was just me.

That didn't mean I didn't have a response.

My phone flew from the armrest of my chair, hidden by an illusion, through the portal and into Diana's hand.

She pressed play on the recording app I had open.

As soon as I had seen the portal widen, I had been remotely putting the recording to a specific spot. Easy to do when you have a thousand eyes and hundreds of limbs.

'"Gods do not ask, they declare."

"Mortals need only heed their protector's, their Gods' will."

"When they defy that will, they are punished."

"This Council, in Our wisdom, conveyed Our will to the women of Themyscira."

"The Amazons failed me, and so judgment was rendered. Should they survive the beast, they will have proven their might and dedication. I shall again render them my protection for their faith at that time."'

The battle stopped as the god's voice came from the phone.

It sucks when you overlook regular, day-to-day, human technology, doesn't it?

"I see," Diana sighed, touching her wristbands gently. Her hope for recreating her previous life left her with that sigh. "We will talk over dinner. Do not be late, or the others will worry. I will make sure there are mashed potatoes."

Then she turned from me and walked passed Wonder Woman, who had stopped trying to peer into the Eldritch Truth and was staring at her god in horror.

The brief pause in the battle gave me time to do two things that tipped everything in my favour.

Kent Nelson flew through the portal, landing on Robin's draconic back. The helmet of Dr. Fate remained behind, wrapped in a tentacle.

Since the old man didn't want to be Free of the Lord of Order's control, I hadn't been able to remove it with a touch, but that didn't mean I couldn't just take it off.

The second thing that happened was the Godslaying Blade piercing Izanagi's foot from below.

It was not a fatal wound, not by a long shot, but it was one that wouldn't heal and bled freely.

The last thing my wives saw as the portal closed was the Japanese deity screaming in rage and pain as divine ichor fell upon my tentacles.

"Foul creature," Izanagi snarled, all former courtly nobless absent from his face. "I shall take great pleasur-"

I would never discover what would give the god such 'great pleasure'.

He died too quickly, crushed beneath a clawed hand larger than a mountain.

Words alone cannot describe how large my actual body is.

My Island was roughly the size of Scotland, if a bit smaller. My body was five times that size, roughly equivalent to the British Isles.

The human mind cannot comprehend with its bare eyes something that large. Even if you fly over me in a plane, you are still too low to see all of me. To be fully visible to anyone, even if they were on the flat of the ocean, I would still need to be outside the atmosphere.

My head alone was bigger than some countries.

It was a pain in the ass.

When the catalogue had said dragons grew as they aged and could even reach universal scales, I hadn't thought about the problems that could bring.

I had been working on it, using Priscilla's spell to try and compress my body, but the smallest I could get before I could shrink no more was still larger than my entire Island. It meant I had been largely confined to my own dimension, lest I destroy the planet with an errant twitch.

But I wasn't on Earth anymore. I was on Olympus.

The dimension buckled and warped under my sheer mass, my body stretching from one end of this reality to the other.

But the dimensional walls held.

Izanagi might still have been able to survive if he wasn't distracted if his power wasn't draining with every drop of blood, and if he had been going all out from the start.

But the gods had underestimated me from the start.

Just like every other god I had met.

So all my mass crushed Izanagi to a bloody pulp.

A bloody pulp that I absorbed.

His power, the echoes of his blood, filled me as I discovered I could still do when I slew Raven's brothers.

Originally, Ares and Poseidon would have been sacrificed to give me enough power to face the five gods on a more even footing.

Poseidon had no power, so I had been left in the lurch.

No more.

To give credit where it was due, the gods immediately took off the kids' gloves.

It was too late.

Vishnu transformed, growing from a hundred-foot giant with four arms, into an avatar of destruction that would have rivalled me in size.

I bit him in half mid-transformation, swallowing the Hindu god in a shower of blood that would have turned the seas red.

This was not anime, and I wasn't stupid.

By that point, the last three were ready, and my size stopped being an advantage.

Zeus's lighting, so much more powerful than ever before, fried half my wings in an instant.

Horus, an actual blazing sun in the sky, melted my head from my neck in enough plasma to burn the Earth's surface dry.

Yu-Huang, an armoured battle god, severed my limbs with a sword the size of a mountain.

They were all incredibly powerful beings, enough to fight off the likes of the Pheonix or Galactus when they pooled their forces.

It wasn't enough.

If all five had come at me with their full power, there was every possibility I would have died.

But now?

I was a Dragon of Freedom and Life, with an endless font of power and Miracles that could regrow anything lost faster than only the three of them could destroy me.

If this became a battle of attrition, I would win.

It didn't.

The most significant benefit of my actual body was never its size, as it prohibited my usual skill and mobility despite the added bulk or power. Nor was it my survivability. Yes, I could now regrow my limbs faster, but I had also lost the semi-metaphysical state my

Great One avatar had.

The greatest gift of my true body was output.

Before, I had been channelling my power through limited mediums. A stream, then a river flowing from the ocean.

Now?

I was the ocean.

I Breathed.

It wasn't my breath, I still didn't have that, but it didn't need to be.

Massive dragon heads formed in Olympus' air.

Yu-Huang was consumed in a tide of Rot, Ekzyke's Decay consuming him in its fetid and disgusting power.

Horus's sun was trapped in an enormous ball of living glintstone, Smarag's breath feeding off the power of stars.

And Zeus?

He fell to a ruin of fire and lightning as Placidusax's two ghostly heads raged.

They fought back, of course. It was a valiant, even heroic effort. I even admired it in my own way.

But it was a doomed effort.

I don't know if they ever even thought to flee, not that I would have let them or called for backup.

If there were other gods on Olympus, I never saw them.

By the time I left, glutted with the blood of five Skyfathers and a god of war, Olympus was completely uninhabitable from all the Rot that filled its air.

Never again would anything call this dimension home.

When I emerged after killing the Earth's greatest defenders, it was to a mad world.

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Medea didn't shout or cry out as she saw the black dragon fall, knowing her warning had come too late.

It would be a lie to say she was calm.

In fact, she was a ball of panic and fear, but Medea remained in control of herself, knowing she couldn't help her Family if she fell under the influence of her emotions.

Teleporting below her falling sister, the Greek Witch caught the shinigami in her arms despite the size difference. Even the weakest Servant was still stronger than most humans, and Yoruichi had the smallest dragon form in the Family.

‘Raven!’

‘I have you.’

Both women disappeared in a swirl of a shadowy cloak.

‘Glynda, get out of there,’ Medea ordered as they reappeared near the medical area set up in Brockton Bay. She set Yoruichi’s body down, mentally calling for Tsunade or Melina to aid the unconscious and dying woman. ‘Tohu’s last power is the Flash. I don’t know how, but it is.’

‘I saw,’ Glynda said, mentally strained. ‘I cannot leave.’

‘This is no time for heroics,’ Medea mentally snarled as she got a good look at Yoruichi.

It wasn’t pretty.

Whatever Tohu had done had ripped a third of the dragon’s body off, leaving an open wound in a rough curve. A piece of her neck was gone, as was her right arm and wing and two-thirds of her torso.

For the first time since appearing on the Island, Medea regretted being summoned in her more powerful, older incarnation instead of her healing-focused younger self.

Yoruichi was still alive thanks to her tough body, enhanced by Haki, but she wouldn’t be for long.

‘Tohu is already gone,’ Glynda continued, not phased by Medea’s harsh words. ‘After you left, it disappeared rather than attack any of us who remained.’

Medea jerked her head up as if expecting to find the three-headed Endbringer to come flying at them.

It didn’t, but one of Tsunade’s shadow clones had emerged from the medical station and was running her glowing green hand over the gaping wound.

“You are not leaving me!” The Hokage’s clone ordered the dragon sternly. “Not you. Not anyone.”

“Will she be all right?” Medea asked.

“I don’t know,” the clone said honestly. “My Life element is not the same as Mikael’s, and I am not familiar with healing dragons, let alone ones as unique as us.”

“Panacea?”

“The Defences,” the clone denied. “Unless she lowers hers, Amelia cannot work on her, and neither can the other heroes. It’s why I’m here. Damnit! You drunk cat!”

“There has to be something! Melina?”

“Accelerated healing can’t work on anything this large. She’s missing most of her organs.”

The ground shook, and Medea instinctively raised her hand, magic gathering to blast

the new arrival to pieces.

Tsunade, the real one, landed beside the three of them as the Female Titan fell to the ground, uncaring for the destruction of the surrounding buildings.

"Wake up!" The Hokage ordered, patterns on her skin glowing purple as light pulsed through her into the unconscious woman. "Damnit, wake up and turn back! I can't do anything for you, you furry bitch!"

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the fur and scales started to recede, and Tsunade breathed a choking sob of relief. Even before the legs had returned to their normal alignment, the blonde was there, sealing the wounds and rebuilding Yoruchi's neck and lung with living wood.

"… you're the furry, Tits," Yoruichi gasped pitifully through a lung full of blood. Tsunade let out a half laugh/half sob.

Medea took a deep breath, reorienting herself now that Yoruichi would live.

Now she needed to decide what they were going to do.

'What do you mean it's gone?'

'As soon as you left, Tohu disappeared.'

'Emma?' Medea asked, half afraid of a response as she could still feel the psychics' chaotic emotions in their bond. 'Can you find it?'

'It's not with Him,' the mutant babbled. 'I still can't find Him! Where is he?'

'The sooner we deal with the monster, the sooner we can look for Mikael,' Melina said plainly.

'… It's not teleporting,' Emma's voice wasn't calm, but it was understandable again. 'It's moving fast and running around the world. It stops occasionally, always singing, but then runs away without attacking anywhere.'

'Where?'

'Too many places. Nowhere already attacked. New York. Ottawa. Berlin. Singapore. Kyoto. Sidney. Marrakesh. Other places. I can't either if nobody saw it, even with His command. Why can't I do it? I should be able to do it. He trusted me. I'm Chosen.'

'Focus!' Medea snapped. It was unkind, but she needed Emma here now. Not spiralling. 'Any pattern.'

When this was all over, they needed to get their therapist a therapist.

'Cities. Important ones. Capitals, centers of trade, famous landmarks.'

'The bastard's a tourist,' Yoruichi snarked mentally, even as Tsunade continued to heal her body.

'Could be confirmation bias,' the Hokage cautioned. 'Emma can only see places with people, doesn't mean it doesn't go other places.'

‘Either way, it doesn’t matter,’ Medea sighed. ‘We’re retreating. Everyone back to the Island.’

‘Understood.’

‘Why!?’

‘I cannot for the moment.’

A torrent of responses flooded the mental channel, but Medea cut them all down.

‘We cannot win,’ the caster said plainly, silencing them. ‘The Speedforce is a source of unlimited energy, on top of the speed it grants its users. A speed only Yoruichi can keep up with to a limited extent, thanks to Observation. And she lost instantly with the combo of Eidolon’s powers. We simply cannot catch up to it, and if we could, we would not be able to kill it. We cannot even lay a trap since we do not know where it will be. This is our loss.’

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but they simply could not defeat the Flash with the addition of Eidolon’s powers and Endbringer’s physiology.

There was a reason the speedster had been the hero Mikael had been most wary of. Which was also the reason Medea knew so much about him and his powers.

‘How is it even using the Flash’s powers,’ Tsunade asked. ‘He is not a parahuman.’

‘The Simurgh,’ Medea answered simply, guilt in her voice. It had been her mistake to underestimate Tohu’s first choice. ‘It perceives the world by looking at the past and the future. We might be immune, but other heroes are not. It simply had to observe the past. The Entities and Endbringers are creatures of science and biology. If Amelia can duplicate Kryptonian biology, there is no reason they cannot duplicate other, non-shard-based powers based on those principles. The Speedforce, despite its somewhat mystical nature, can be accessed by scientific means.’

It was easy to forget, with all the flashy powers and Endbringers, but the Cycle the Entities created was part breeding, part eating, and part scientific study.

If the creatures could survive a comic world, they would have an enormous amount of new information and powers to test and make their own.

‘And the Simurgh didn’t use it because it never had the chance,’ Tsunade put the rest of the pieces together. ‘It only attacked a few times and was still ramping up.’

‘If it would at all,’ Glynda said. ‘Before we killed the Stranger, they never needed to go that far.’

‘It is all irrelevant for the moment,’ Medea brought them back to task. ‘Tsunade can leave her clones to keep healing, but the rest of us will return to the Island. Glynda, how long till you can drop that safely?’

‘Five minutes.’

‘Raven, keep aiding evacuations, but once Glynda is done, I want you to leave the rest to your Emoticlones. We can defend the Island while we wait for the Endbringer to retreat.’

‘I can still help,’ Raven denied. ‘Tohu cannot hurt me.’

‘And we thought it couldn’t beat Yoruichi either! I’m not taking the risk, not with Mikael gone and not under my watch!’

‘Thou are not thinking rationally,’ Ranni said, rejoining their conversation after killing the Stranger. ‘Pride has told me of the issues we face. While our Lord Husband is occupied, the rules of the Jewel remain the same. The beast need only approach with the intent to do us harm, and it shall be able to pass.’

‘And it won’t be able to leave,’ Medea countered. ‘I am not telling us to run to the Island because it’s home. It is simply the most defensible option, even without Mikael. I’ve had over a year with practically unlimited mana and material there. I’ve turned the entire dimension into my workshop.’

There was a beat of silence as the group decided what to do. Just because Medea was left in charge didn’t mean everyone would listen to her.

The Greek Witch took the moment’s reprieve to look over Yoruichi’s condition.

Tsunade had already replaced the missing parts of her body, a curving section from hip to neck along her right side, with wooden flesh perfectly mimicking what had been there before. Medea didn’t know if it was a joke, but the replaced breast even had a nipple, visible thanks to the shifter’s lack of clothes.

Yoruichi was experimentally stretching the arm this way and that.

“Amelia will be able to make it actual flesh once she is not so busy,” the Hokage told her lover.

“Thanks,” the shinigami gave the blonde a quick peck, and they both looked at Medea.

‘Melina?’

‘I shall join you in a minute. We are close to finishing the injured from Behemoth’s attack.’ The caster looked at Tsunade, who wordlessly nodded and entered the healing station to help speed things up. Opening their own portal home, the familiar grey rectangular doorway, she delivered the last of her instructions.

‘Once you are done, I want you to retreat right away. Who knows if Tohu’s will come here when-’ Medea’s mental voice was cut off by Emma overriding her.

‘I can get Tohu.’

‘What?’ Medea asked once she could speak telepathically again, hurriedly steeping through the portal. ‘You can catch it?’

‘No, but I can bring it to the Island. Once it’s here, how confident are you in being able to kill it?’

The doorway had deposited the pair of women near the front of the Mansion, and it didn’t take long to find the telepath.

Emma looked rough.

Still clad in the outfit of the ‘White Queen’, she stood near the table, the one she liked to sit at and stare out at Mikael’s dragon form. She stood there, completely motionless, like a diamond statue. Her chest didn’t even move, for she did not need to breathe.

She had wholly retreated into her mental self, body discarded for the moment.

‘With Priscilla’s aid? Completely,’ Medea answered mentally, rather than try and draw a reaction out from the psychic in the physical world. ‘How will you get it here?’

‘My semblance.’ Medea had to bite back the question that came with the simple answer. Emma had explicitly told everyone that she didn’t know her Semblance. Turns out Emma didn’t need to be asked. ‘I discovered it months ago.’

‘Why didn’t you tell us,’ Glynda’s question was gentle but reprimanding. ‘I could have helped you train it.’

‘It is not something controllable. It is an all-or-nothing ability that affects everything it touches, everything my mind extends to. No exceptions. Animals, plants, the undead, even the golems. And if I cover the world, it will reach Tohu, no matter where it runs. But He will not be happy. He hates it. It is a Master ability.’

Rather than curse out her husband and fellow wife, and the secrets they continued to keep from the Family, Medea remained focused on the here and now.

‘I do not doubt thy abilities,’ Ranni chimed, appearing as well on the Island thanks to her own portal. ‘But the Endbringers have proven immune to psychics and Masters. Why wouldn’t thy Semblance be different? And how would thee reach the monster?’

‘I am still powered by His Command. I can cover the entire planet in its effect. And it is not a… nice effect. It is not psychic or biological. I attained it while I was in His mind the third time. When He used me to free Him from the prison. He called it ‘Lover’s Dream’. It will come to me, and so will everyone else who can.’

‘Doesn’t sound too bad,’ Yoruichi mentally replied, trying to inject some cheer into the conversation. ‘Romantic even. Mikael can be sap sometimes.’

Medea didn’t think so.

A Semblance, the manifestation of a person’s soul, of an incredibly powerful and mad psychic? One conceived in the eldritch brain of the Great One that had driven said psychic crazy in the first place and powered by said Great One’s limitless energy?

It might be better for the world to let Tohu run rampant.

At least there was a good chance the Endbringer would eventually go dormant like the others. If the Entities had been able to access the Speedforce all along and had only used it now, then it was probable that they were still biding their time.

Emma didn't do anything, her body as unresponsive as ever, but the Greek Witch could feel her mental attention on her. Just as the caster could feel the panic, the pain, the fear, and the despair of the woman through their mental connection, she could also feel the desperate need for guidance, for instruction.

Mikael had left Medea in charge, and unless he returned, Emma would follow her orders until she died.

Whatever happened next, the decision, her fate, was in her hands.

In the end, it came down to what she valued most.

Leaving an enemy alive, one that could strike at any time and could access something as deadly as the Speedforce, was entirely against her nature when she could do something about it.

When she had told Melina that history tended to repeat with Servants, she hadn't been lying.

Medea of Colchis was someone who got revenge.

Fuck the world.

Her Family came first.

'Give me and Priscilla a minute to set up. Yoruichi, defend her once she starts. Ranni keep an eye, or a hundred, out for more unpleasant surprises. Everyone else not engaged should focus on rescue efforts. I said we'd kill them all, and I meant it.'

******

Primary Objective… 91% complete.

Energy levels… exceeding parameters.

Structural integrity… compromised.

Likelihood of achieving Primary Objective before destruction… 97%.

Proceeding along Unit 03's simulation.

Relocating to next destination… Arrived. Designation: 'Gotham'.

Targets located. Triggers implanted in local host.

Primary Objective… 92% complete.

Relocating to next destination… Arrived. Designation: 'Cadmus'

Targets located. Triggers implanted in local host.

Primary Objective… 94% complete.

Relocating to- Error. Error.

Unknown energy source detected.

All objectives overridden.

New Primary Objective… 'Please Him.'

Relocating to next destination… Arrived. Designation: 'Elden Lord's Dimension.'

Additional Assets in proximity.

Additional Assets irrelevant.

Unit 06 immobile. Cause… Magic. Additional Assets approaching.

Immobility irrelevant.

Energy exceeding maximum capacity, structural integrity severely compromised.

Loss of structural integrity irrelevant.

'Death' approaching.

'Death' irrelevant.

MuSt PlEas- HIm.

******

It was a minor tragedy compared to everything else the world had experienced that day.

On the bloodiest day the world had ever seen was a tragedy with only one casualty. Said casualty was the last Endbringer. It should have been a thing for celebration.

But it was the one tragedy everyone, and everything felt.

Hero or villain.

Super or normal.

From Brockton Bay to Beijing and everywhere in between.

So powerful was Emma's Command enhanced Semblance that it even echoed into the blackness of space for the psychically sensitive, thousands of lightyears away, to feel.

The ability was as simple as it was terrible.

It was just emotion.

The emotion of a Dreamer towards those it had protected for millions of years.

The emotion one man felt for the women he loved.

The emotion a mad woman was baptized in while plumbing the depths of the mind of a madman.

It was Love.

An all-encompassing, all-accepting, all-powerful Love that was Free, without any limits.

A Mad Love.

A Love you would do anything to feel.

A Love that would drive you crazy.

Emma only kept her Semblance active for a few moments. Planes were diverted. People got in cars and started driving. Boats took to the sea. Birds flew, fish swam, land animals began to migrate en mass, and even the plants bent toward the source of that all-encompassing Love.

Everyone and everything, for those few moments, were all pointing towards one Island and Diamond Dragon that flew in its skies.

Superimposed over that beautiful creature was the image of another dragon, one gleaming white with six wings and clutching a jewel.

In that time, dozens of Supers who could fly or teleport or move fast enough arrived at the Jewel and found their way blocked.

Only those who intended harm could pass.

Nobody and nothing could intend harm to the source of that Love.

Not even Tohu.

In the end, Priscilla, upon a dragon of Magic's back, flew out of the Jewel to cut the Endbringer in half. Below, Yoruichi protected Emma from the entire Island of creatures trying to reach her.

It was almost anti-climatic, but nobody cared.

For when the last of the Endbringers died, it took the Love with it, and everything in the world was the lesser for it.

A tiny tragedy that everyone had felt.

Everyone who lived through that day would, until the day they died, feel the loss of that Love.

The day the world's heart broke.

Like Dragon Day, it would eventually come to be an international holiday.

A day to remember the dead.

A day to celebrate the last victory over the Endbringers, monsters the world had thought unvanquishable.

A day to mourn the loss of a Love they would never feel again, the only Master ability people wished they could feel again.

The day the world's heart broke.

The entire day would come to be called 'Heartbreak'.

Author's Note:

It's late, and I am tired.

I didn't have time to edit this one, so pardon me if it's a bit janky.

But I have never missed a deadline, and the final chapter of volume 2 will not be the first.

I am not going to lie. The response from last week's release had a part to play. I won't stop writing, not until I finish this story, even if nobody reads it, but I do feel more invigorated to write when I get positive feedback.

Not to say that some of the criticism isn't valid; it most certainly was. Some of it, at least. I, more than anyone else, know the faults in my writing. Because of the lack of editing, the hang-ups, and the constraints I placed on myself by trying to create an original story out of a triple crossover using the Waifu Catalogue, of all challenges.

I am in no way a perfect, or even professional, writer. I don't even have a Patreon.

Volume 2 suffers from middle child syndrome. If I were to put it into context, I think of it as Isolation from volume one. We are still in the setup phase, with volume three being comparable to Solitude and Desolation. The pacing suffers from that, and my desire to be a bit more experimental with the arcs.

But, for all that, I hope some are still enjoying it.

I will see you all next week for the epilogue.

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

Night is now falling
So ends this day
The road is now calling
And I must away
Over hill and under tree
Through lands where never light has shone
By silver streams that run down to the Sea
To these memories, I will hold
With your blessing, I will go
To turn at last to paths that lead home
And though where the road then takes me
I cannot tell
We came all this way
But now comes the day
To bid you farewell
I bid you all a very fond farewell.

The fourth miracle.

A simple thing, yet irreplaceable.

Time.

Time to rest.

Time to heal.

Time for broken hearts to mend.

White wings flew silently around the world, gold light raining down upon all. A combination of miracles, powered by a well that would never run dry, rained gold upon a battered and bruised world.

All the tragedies, loss and pain would come tomorrow.

For one day and one day alone, Mikael bathed the world in a golden glow.

All sickness was healed. All injuries were recovered.

For one day, the Earth could rest and recover.

For one day, there was peace.

******

"NOOOOOOOO!" I screamed my pain and frustration to the sky, falling down on my knee/tentacles. "Why god? (That I don't believe in and possibly killed) Why? Have I not been good? Have I not done my best? Why must you do this to me?"

“Out of everything that happened, this is what gets him down?” Robin sighed in fond exasperation. “And how did I hear those parentheses? Is that a Great One trick?”

I ignored her, too caught up in my pain as I screamed to the heavens.

“Is it the decide?” “Probably.” “Because I can stop. Really, I can.”

Yoruichi’s interruption was also ignored as I partook in communion… with myself.

“No more killing gods! … unless they deserve it. But apart from that, I will be a pious little squidboi. So, please! Please! Undo what I have wrought! Right my wrongs! Do not let me suffer the consequences of my actions!”

“Is this truly the creature that slew Lord Zeus?”

One of the Amazons’, I don’t know whose, mutterings reached my ears. I whirled on the group of survivors, gesticulating frantically with my tentacles in frustration at her general direction.

I was being silly! Don’t ruin it with your logic or expectations.

Even with my recent flight, the world could do with more silly.

“Give me Zeus! Give me Odin! Give me all the Skyfathers again! Just don’t make me any bigger!”

Maybe it was because I, who had killed him, was talking about their dead god.

Maybe they were embarrassed by my over-the-top (and wholly justified) actions.

Maybe they had just had a rough forty-eight hours.

No matter the reason, none of the surviving Amazons looked happy to see me.

They also didn’t look angry, though, which was weird.

In the end, it didn’t matter what they thought of me. They were the ones on my Island, outside my mansion, while I was trying to rebuild my Baby Cthulhu body. I should be able to get a human body again later today, but to do so required being able to see the biokinetic without turning all the nearby humans into fish people on accident.

“Mikael,” Diana sighed, both in fond exasperation and supplication. “Can you please get over it for the moment? Hippolyta has something to ask of you.”

She wasn’t using any titles for the woman.

Awkward.

“Easy for you to say,” I said with a pout. I didn’t have lips, per se, but I could get my disproportionately large eyes to water convincingly. “You’re not the one who grew three sizes yesterday! I was dieting! Exercising! Watching my waistline! Using power beyond mortal minds to shrink! And now… Look at me! I am even fatter!”

“I honestly cannot tell the difference,” Yoruichi poked at my pride, and I turned my watery eyes on her.

It was my mistake, as Robin was standing behind her.

Within an eyeblink, I was caught up and cuddled in the pirate's arms as she pressed me into her chest.

…I think I lost some of the gravitas I held with the Amazons, but I saw this as an absolute win.

I turned my head one hundred and eighty degrees to keep glaring at the cat from my prison of breasts. It was easy to do since I didn't have any bones.

"I grew thirteen whole kilometres! And I'm still shrunk! That means I actually grew sixty-five! Do you know how long that takes me to grow in just age? Hundreds of thousands of years!"

"Is it the lack of human body which makes him act so?" Hippolyta whispered into Diana's ear. "Lord Mikael did not seem so… whimsical when last we spoke. Nor is he that… *thing* we saw."

"No," Diana sighed again, but there was an uptick in her lips. "This is how he acts most of the time. It's a good thing, believe it or not. After everything, it is good to see him this way."

"I understand." Hippolyta seemed to mean what she said as she turned to face me directly.

She bowed deep and low.

The few dozen Amazons' behind her did the same.

"Elden Lord. I come not as a queen but as a supplicant petitioning for aid. Our gods have betrayed us, and our home has been destroyed. We are a people without a place to call our own. Please allow us refuge on your island. We shall build far from your home, so you need never hear or see us. We have neither money nor goods, but I hope my services may convince you to bestow your grac-"

"Sure."

"-e upon… Pardon?"

"You can live on my Island if you want," I said with a shrug. My ego appreciated the sight of a horde of beautiful women bowing to me, but they could have just asked, especially since I had actually liked Hippolyta, besides the whole 'trap and pet of the gods' bit. "I let murdering psychopaths in here. Why wouldn't I allow you guys? Don't know why you'd want to, though. I told you it was a death trap, right? I do not doubt your capabilities, but you will die. It might not be soon, maybe in a year, decade, or century, but this Island is no paradise. If the drakes, hydras, or basilisks don't get you, the Rot or the Old Blood will. You'd be better off asking Hera, Artemis, or your other patrons for a new home."

"That is not possible."

“Why not?” I asked the Amazon, whose name I didn’t know. She looked like the priestess type and had one of Tsunade’s wooden limbs for a foot. I had just killed their chief god yesterday, so why was she looking at me like that? “I get they’re busy. I kinda made a mess of Olympus, but they should be able to sort you out if you give them a few weeks.”

“It is impossible because there are no gods currently on Earth outside of the Norse pantheon.”

“What?” I asked, completely befuddled by Diana’s words.

“It is something I wished to speak with you about,” my Amazonian wife looked concerned. “All powers stemming from the divine have ceased. No matter the pantheon, be they of the five you slew or not, all communion with the gods but those of Asgard no longer exist.”

“Isn’t that how it’s been since I’ve landed?” I asked. I now knew there had been a sort of gag order from the divine, led by the Skyfathers until they decided what to do with me. “The whole Blinding thing spooked them. I imagine it’s worse now that I went all ‘Grr, argh. I’mma kill you. Grr.’ On their strongest members.”

I honestly wouldn’t blame them if the remaining gods decided to keep their heads down.

I wasn’t out to kill them, but they didn’t know that.

“Nay,” the priestess Amazon shook her head. “Their silence was never total. We could still feel their presence, their blessings upon us. We could reach out to them, even should they wish not to respond. But no more. It is as if they never existed.”

“Maybe they’re just hiding really well?” I shrugged stubby tentacle shoulders, seven of them. Cut me some slack. I had only a day to compress my Great One body down enough to not melt the minds of everyone on the planet. “And I don’t think you all are in their best graces at the moment.”

“We believed so as well,” Hippolyta nodded grimly. “Willingly or not, discarded or no, we played a part in Lo- Zeus’ death. But it is not just us you have felt their silence.”

“Shazam lost most of his blessings,” Diana explained. “Moon Knight has passed on. The Sorcerer Supreme’s artifacts powered by the divine have gone dormant. All of them. No matter the magician or priest, they cannot reach their patrons. It is as if every god of any power has disappeared from the planet. As if they have all retreated from any connection to the mortal world.”

“Or they’re dead,” Robin interjected morbidly with a smile on her face.

“I didn’t do it,” I said automatically. It was a major pet peeve of mine. I was fine taking responsibility for my actions but taking the blame for things I didn’t do was

something I hated. “Promise. I’m innocent. I’ve turned over a new leaf. No more deicide for this squidboi. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Even as I drew a little cross over where a heart should be, a mouth opened on my chest, revealing rows of eyes instead of teeth.

That was accidental, but I acted like it was on purpose by making all the eyes wink at the women.

The Amazons looked at the new organ in disgust.

Whoops. Forgot not everyone was used to body horror as comedy.

After the first decade in a death world with only the undead as company, you tend to take what humour you can.

I drew the mask further to the forefront as the mouth of eyes receded into my chest.

“We do not believe you to be at fault, Lord Mikael.” The way Hippolyta spoke, so deferential and appeasing, set my tentacles shivering. And not in a good way. What happened to the woman who had stared me down just a few days ago? “The opposite, in fact.”

“As I was recovering from your… presence, Lord Mikael, and you were battling with Lord Zeus and the Skyfathers, we felt your Love.” I twitched at the priestess’ words but didn’t say anything. “Both Lady Athena and Lady Hestia spoke to me in its wake. They asked that I entreat you for sanctuary.”

“So you bunk with me for a bit till your goddess’ get back. That makes more sense.”

“Nay. They asked for sanctuary for themselves.”

“And the other Olympians?” I frowned in thought as my cat jumped, stubby wings flapping, and grabbed one of my tentacles in her mouth.

Medea didn’t swallow it whole as usual, only lightly nibbling on its tip. I guess she was still full from eating Ciara’s shard a few days ago.

“They mentioned not a word of anybody in specific, just asking for sanctuary. The vision was short.” The Amazons watched Medea eat with horrified fascination as my chubby limb regrew.

The cute display didn’t distract me from my thoughts, though.

What was going on here?

I did not believe, for even a second, that Emma’s little light show had been enough to get goddess throwing themselves at my feet and proclaiming their undying love for me.

Ignoring that the effect wasn’t active for more than a minute, leaving all who felt it distinctly aware they had been Mastered and thus pissed off. The simple fact was I had killed their father/brother and destroyed their home.

Even if the pair were incredibly pragmatic, which they might be since I had never met

them, and decided to get on my good side so I wouldn't do the same to them, asking for sanctuary was a poor way to go about it.

And through an intermediary?

Why not come out after I had killed Zeus?

Or help him fight me?

Hestia, goddess of the hearth, let her brother, the patriarch of her pantheon, die and switched sides instantly?

Athena, the goddess of wisdom, did the same in an inefficient manner that did not benefit her?

Even though I had never met either of them, their actions didn't make sense in relation to their portrayal in myths, comics, or even what the locals of this world knew.

Unless…

"They caught on," I sighed. "They realized we were being played against each other."

"That was my inference as well," Diana said as she gestured to the group. "I brought them here as soon as you could handle the company."

"Without melting their brains, you mean?"

I was honestly impressed that it had only taken me a day to return to Baby Cthulhu form. It took me a week of dedicated effort only a few months ago. I was also impressed the Amazons were handling it so well. Only a day ago, they had been exposed to the full effect of a child Great One and now were facing its shrouded form. I wondered what sort of Insight they were getting, but that boat had sailed, so I didn't worry too much about it.

"Probably a good call. Keep them here while I am out. Raven and I will see about investigating divine realms and see if anyone is around. If they are, they can't do anything to me, even if I did kill their chief gods."

I wasn't going to go into the distinction between 'avatar me' and 'real me' in front of the Amazons, but I didn't need to, as the rest of the Family got the hint.

"And in return for sanctuary?" Hippolyta asked. It was faint, but I detected a hint of resignation in her voice.

I took a good look at her.

She looked bad.

Well, that wasn't true. I did not think it was possible for Amazons to look bad. Even soaking wet, covered in blood, and tired from the long battle, none of them looked less than 'action movie heroine.' They didn't have eye bags, and even their messed-up hair looked half-intentional.

But, the slump of her shoulders, the way her eyes drifted to her people and flinched away, and the way she had yet to meet my eyes once told me that the Queen of the

Amazons was nowhere near top form.

Heroes were people too, and this one had just lost friends and family, been abandoned by her god, the father of her child, and seen the home she had built and protected for thousands of years destroyed.

She had every right to be tired.

But here she was, still trying to secure something for her people.

“Nothing,” I shrugged five chubby arm tentacles at her surprised look. “Quite frankly, you have nothing I want, nor can you offer any service me and my Family cannot do ourselves. Actually, now that I think of it, are you even able to live here? If the gods are gone, aren’t you just normal women again? Kick ass and skilled, but not the superhumans the gods blessed you with? I will tell you right now, as someone who can speak from experience, no matter how skilled you are, the creatures and monsters of this Island will kill you. If you can’t shrug off your own death, you should not be here.”

Since they hadn’t already, I assumed they wouldn’t die of old age catching up to them or turn to stone like they did in a few comics.

“Your concern warms our hearts, Lord Mikael.” An Amazon, one I didn’t recognize, bowed again. She was one of the ones staring at me weirdly. Not angry, but something else. “The blessings of our goddesses have not receded. They are given and are permanent unless removed by the gods themselves. Such has been the case with our wayward sisters over the years. Such is now the case with us.”

“Fair enough,” I shrugged again. This time, I only had three shoulders. I was almost done converting myself to a stable body, so the number of eyes or blades that randomly grew on me was much lower now. “But, as I said, whether or not you live on the Island doesn’t matter to me. Same rules as everyone else. I won’t hurt or help you. You’re not allowed to cross the southern mountain range. The boundary field will stop you and alert me if you try. You also cannot leave without my express permission. A fail-safe to keep the things here from breaking out. Apart from that, you are free to do whatever you want.”

“What is your tribute of choice?” The priestess asked. “During the Festival of Five, the goddesses accepted a deer. Is that satisfactory, or do you wish for a different sacrifice, Lord Mikael?”

“Nothing,” I repeated with a sigh. “This is not a religion. I am not a god. The only reason I am ‘helping’ you.” I made air quotes with my nubby tentacles. “Is because it literally costs me nothing.”

I wasn’t a hero, but that didn’t mean I was against helping people if I could. I simply had a calculus I made. Does it cost me something? And if so, what do I gain from it?

Mercenary? Sure, but I found it an excellent way to balance all I could do so I avoided

falling into the Superman dilemma.

I was an asshole, but I still had some basic empathy.

In this case, both sides of the equation were at zero, so I saw no reason not to let them live here. Either it would be temporary, in which case they would leave, and I wouldn't have to care, or it wasn't, and they'd eventually die out in a decade or two.

And if they tried something? I could sneeze at them and wipe them out.

"While we appreciate your kindness," Hippolyta said, regaining some of her old fire to finally meet my eyes. There was a stubbornness there, a pride that wouldn't back down. She was once again speaking to me as two leaders of differing factions. "We have not fallen so low as to forget grace given. Your family has saved our lives. You are offering us a place to rebuild."

"That will probably kill you," I pointed out.

Again.

Why do people keep thinking this is some sort of 'promised land.' It was literally an amalgamation of five death worlds.

"And it is the only place our patrons believed safe from our enemy, whoever they may be." Hippolyta's counter was quick and decisive. Her mojo must be coming back with a vengeance. "Whether you acknowledge it or not, we are in your debt. And we pay our debts."

Her words, as stubborn as they were, seemed to put something back into the Amazons behind her. Their shoulders squared, back straightened, and they all looked at me as if daring me to deny their Queen's words.

Well played, Queen of the Amazons.

But you are fighting a battle you cannot win, for I have the power of anime and silliness on my side.

"Tell you what," I said slyly. For some reason, my wives took a step away from me. How rude. "I will accept a tribute. But not a sacrifice."

"In what manner," the priestess asked with a frown.

"Nothing too bad," I waived off their concern. My wives looked worriedly at each other. "It's simple. Every month that you still live on my Island, every one of you must make at least one pun."

"No!" Yoruichi gasped in horror while Robin giggled. "Anything but that!"

"Yes!" I declared in my most serious voice. "A pun a month. That is the rent you must pay me."

"A pun?" The priestess tilted her head in confusion and looked around at the horrified and pained looks my wives were sending me. "Is that short for a punishment? Of what

sort?"

"A pun is a type of joke," Diana said, holding her face in her hands after facepalming hard enough to shatter stone. "A witticism based on plays of words, usually involving words sounding the same but with different meanings. Do not mind him. He is joking."

"I am not," I declared imperiously as the Amazons looked between us in confusion. "Those are my terms. Should you violate them, I will know." I wouldn't, but they didn't need to know that. "A pun per person per month. Within a few years, you will be making them without even realizing it. It will be amazoning."

My wives, and Hippolyta, groaned. I think that one physically pained them.

I cackled.

"You are the worst," Yoruichi deadpanned at me. "Just the worst. And now you are corrupting these poor women."

"I get it," an Amazon said with a clap of her hands. "A test of creativity. Lady Diana spoke of you as a spirit of Freedom. You wish for us to prove our ability to think for ourselves."

No. I just thought the idea of the super serious Greek Amazons making puns would be funny, and it would get them off my back.

"Exactly! Well done," I declared.

She beamed, and the others nodded in understanding, buying my bullshit for some reason. Again, I had killed her god less than a day ago. These women were weird. They weren't stupid, and I thought they hated men, so what was happening here?

"We understand your wish, Lord Mikael," the priestess nodded at me. "You seek for us not to depend on you but to build lives for ourselves. We shall strive to make it as 'amazoning' as possible."

I laughed so hard that my control over my body slipped, and a dozen eyes opened, all narrowed in mirth.

"The worst," Diana repeated Yoruichi's words, her head still in her hands. "We need to leave. Now. Follow me. I'll take you to a place I know. It's defensible, close to the boundary, and far from most of the worst the Island has to offer. I'll walk you through the greater threats to avoid as well."

"Hippolyta, a moment," I said, getting my laughter under control as the group was led away. She paused, and I turned to look at Robin for a second. "Do you mind letting Medea know about this? Don't want her running into them before we tell her."

"Probably for the best," the pirate nodded and dissolved her body in a flurry of pink petals, leaving me to fall to the ground while Yoruichi and the Queen watched, the former with a grin.

All the rest of my Family were still out and about, providing what help they could in the relief effort from the cluster fuck. I had healed everyone, but food, rescue, and relocation efforts could not be solved with a simple healing flyby.

I'd join them as soon as I was safe to be around.

"You sure this is a good idea," Yoruichi asked. "She's not going to like having them around."

"Medea will surprise you. For all her disdain for the gods, she has a soft spot for those they fuck over. I wouldn't be surprised if she whips them up a bounded field or such for their territory."

"If this new land is as dangerous as you claim," Hippolyta grimaced. "We will not turn down what aid we can get."

"Which brings me to why I pulled you aside," I absentmindedly scratched Medea's ears as she continued to nibble on one of my tentacles. "Why are you here, Hippolyta?"

"I told yo-"

"I just killed Zeus," I interrupted her and she shut her mouth with a click. "Yes, we were pitted against each other by some shadowy mastermind, but that doesn't change the fact that I killed the chief god of your pantheon. Diana's father."

"He was also Heracles' father," the Amazon bit out the name with pure hatred.

I didn't comment.

There were some things you don't joke about.

"He was a major dick, don't get me wrong. All of them were. And even if they weren't, I don't regret what I did. Even if I hadn't been manipulated into that situation by whatever the fuck was going on with Poseidon, I would have ended up clashing with them eventually. So if you are expecting me to take care of you all out of some sort of guilt, you are mistaken. I might not be the threat to the world they tried to paint me as, but neither am I a saviour. And you all hurt Diana with your actions. You had to have known it was risky to come here. That is why you left Donna behind, isn't it? So I will ask again, why are you here?"

Hippolyta gave me a rye smile as she seemed to sag in on herself.

The strong front she had been putting up for her people gave way to the woman who had probably just had the second worst day of her long life.

"Because we have nowhere else to go," she said, sounding helpless. "Man's world is in ruins, and they are scrambling to rebuild. My goddesses, the women who took me and mine in when we were at our lowest, are probably dead, or they would have reached out to us in some manner. We are an abandoned people with nowhere to go."

"Most countries would have leapt at the offer you gave me," I pointed out. "After the

last few days, they would have given you anything at all in exchange for a few Amazons acting as heroes for them. Land. Independence. To say nothing of your relationship with Wonder Woman and the Justice League or your actions during the World Wars."

"And would my people have been safe?" She asked rhetorically. "Even should I find someone whose words I could trust, most of my friends from my time as Wonder Woman are long dead. My people would have become weapons for any country eventually or become enemies. And if they didn't? What happens when the next Endbringer attacks? One of those creatures would have wiped us out had it not been for your wives. But you and your family have killed or aided in the death of every one of the beasts. With my goddesses' last words, is it any wonder I would consider your home to be the most fitting place for what remains of my people?"

I considered telling her that the only reason my Family had been so effective against the Endbringers was that we had knowledge of their abilities ahead of time, a knowledge that had run dry. As proven by the Stranger Endbringer, who I heard was temporarily being designated Sebettu, there was every possibility more Endbringers were coming, and I would know nothing about them.

"I kept Donna away because she is too young to spend her life here," Hippolyta continued. "My daughter has promised to place her with the Teen Titans, a team also under the protection of your wives."

"You might be safe here from outside threats, but that doesn't explain why you, and your entire people, seem to be ignoring the god-killing squidboi in the room. I would think you would want nothing to do with me."

There was a long pause as Hippolyta seemed to give my words some thought, and I kept compressing myself more and more into my Baby Cthulhu body. A few more limbs, and I should be good to go. Yoruichi watched us in silence, arms crossed.

"Before I told her of the invitation, I asked my daughter about you," the Queen eventually spoke. "She talked about what they had discovered and what she learned on her own. Insight, I believe you called it. Knowing the Truth of something without ever actually learning. She spoke of dreams, visions, and sometimes revelations that seemed to come from nowhere when a thought entered her head. It sounded much like Penelope's prophesies, so I did not think much of it then."

"That is not an… incorrect way to think of Insight," I hedged. "But it is not about so much about future knowledge, or even gaining knowledge, but about being confronted with the truth of the world and accepting it. That is the key. Being able to accept the Truth. If you cannot, you will frenzy. Through her resonance with my wife, your daughter gained Insight into me specifically, but it doesn't have to be about me. Just about peeling

the layers of reality away to see what is actually happening and not what our limited minds can accept is happening. Theoretically, someone with infinite Insight will never be deceived by illusion, lies, or even the limits of time and space. They will know and see all."

I had always believed that to be how the Great Old Ones had a form of limited omniscience. That would fit in with what I knew of the Mythos and Bloodborne. They weren't wholly omniscient, limited to their own viewpoints as they were, and it didn't grant understanding, just vision in the metaphysical sense. That was why they could not understand mortals, for they knew we had limits but could not understand such a concept.

"And do you? See all, I mean."

"No," I snorted. "Except in very specific circumstances, I am just as fallible as anyone else, as the last few days proved. Nor do I want that ability. It would seriously suck. But we've digressed. You were explaining your reasoning."

"I do not know what all my sisters saw when Dr. Fate opened the portal," Hippolyta stared into the distance, northward where Diana had taken her people. "I do not even know what I saw. The pain blinded me within seconds, and I fell unconscious. What I do know is what I saw in that Dream."

I did not like her tone.

"I saw you. Alone. Burning for thousands of years."

The Kiln of the First Flame.

It always seemed to come back to fire.

Yoruichi had me in her arms in a flash, hugging me tight.

"I went mad after the first decade. You held on till the end."

Not by choice.

"I was only unconscious for a few seconds, but when I awoke, I wondered how? How had you retained your sanity till the end?"

Because I had been forced to. I was no more special than the average Joe. I had just been put in a situation that was anything but average, and I did everything I could to stumble my way out.

"Then I felt the call."

Hippolyta looked at me then, and I finally could understand the emotions in her eyes.

Behind the weariness, heartbreak, fear, and a soul-deep yearning I knew she must despise, I saw something I hated.

An overwhelming sense of pity.

"It… that's how you feel all the time?"

I had been trying to ignore it with silliness. Occupying my mind with the implications

of Poseidon and the possibility of a divine armageddon, to say nothing of the 'enemy' the gods spoke of.

Powered by my Command Seal, Emma had Mastered the entire planet. She had done so using a copy of my mind.

I hated Mastering people.

I considered the act of being forced to live, even as someone else occupied your body and you were trapped in your mind, to be a fate worse than death. And I had died a lot.

And that is what happens when you are Mastered. Something *else* is there, but you are not.

What I had done to Emma was the worst version of what I hated.

Emma had essentially done to everything alive what had been done to her. My sin repeated a trillionfold. And everyone knew it. Knew they had been Mastered in a way that bent them to my every whim.

All the hard work I had put into our image, all the efforts to make my Family accepted, all undone in less than a minute.

And the worst part?

"It is."

I did not blame her for it.

When I heard of what Medea had authorized, and Emma had done to protect themselves and kill Tohu, all I could say was 'Good job.'

I would rather violate my greatest taboo, one of the few morals I held tightly, than risk the loss of my Family.

I had chosen them over my fear. I guess giving up my morals for them was just another sign that I was still human.

Hypocrisy and all.

"That is why I am here," Hippolyta answered finally. "I do not know what you are, what you will do, or where you come from. All I know is that if I can secure even a fraction of that… Love for my people, I shall never fear them being abandoned again."

"I not going to date, sleep with, or marry any of you," I said immediately, cutting off that train of thought. "If you expect that to happen, leave now. If you try to force it to happen, I will immediately throw you into the Lake of Rot and watch the flesh melt from your bones."

I did not have enough time to spend with the women I currently loved, let alone have time for others. I only entertained Emma's little 'plan' because it was irrelevant to me. Even if the local Emma Frost fell in love with me, it would not change the fact that I loved only one woman with that name.

I did not need some overt show of love, a grandiose plan or a flowery proclamation.

I just wanted what I already had.

My Family, my Freedom and myself.

“I did not mean it such as that,” Hippolyta shook her head. “I know how futile such a plan would be. I simply meant that, given enough time, we will simply be part of what you consider ‘yours’.”

More than anything else, that told me of the Insight the Amazons had gained.

People who felt Emma’s semblance felt the love I felt for my Family, but they did not understand it.

My Love was not kind, was not human, or even rational.

It was a Mad Love, one I could only feel to those who were ‘Mine’.

It had been nurtured for millions of years as I watched over the women who had saved me from myself.

“Even a fraction of infinity is still infinite,” Hippolyta said as she walked away.

Then she paused.

“One other thing,” the Queen of the Amazons said as if remembering something. “I do not know what it means, but I received one more vision after I awoke.”

“Shoot.”

“I saw a small restaurant, a deli, whatever that is, at the foot of rocky mountains. At one of the tables, a woman waits for you. Pale as the grave.”

I said nothing, my face carefully neutral, as Hippolyta walked away.

******

The world had changed.

The bloodiest day in human history had come and gone, and in its wake, the living were left to pick up the pieces.

Millions were dead. Cities laid to ruin.

China had the worst of it in pure numbers of dead. But the full ramifications of Heartbreak would not be clear until much later.

Behemoth might have been a distraction, and the battle with Leviathan was far from well-known, but studies of Khonsu’s and Tohu’s actions would be hotly debated for years to come.

What was their fault? What were other actors taking advantage of the situation? And what was pure bad luck?

Nobody would ever know for sure, but one thing was clear.

The dead, those innumerable lives lost, on Heartbreak had been tangential. Collateral damage in the wake of a larger plan that became apparent too late.

Mass chaos.

Khonsu's teleportation hadn't been random. It targeted places of cultural significance and people of influence and power. Politicians, governmental authorities, religious leaders, industry tycoons.

It only had enough time in each location to get off one attack before Yoruichi was on it, and it was forced to flee, but each attack counted. Deathtoll-wise, Khonsu had killed a fraction of a fraction of Bohu, but the wounds it inflicted on the structure of the world were extensive.

You don't need Simurgh's scream to cause chaos, to pit humans against one another.

Simply create a gap, a void filled with power, money, and influence, and humanity will fight and kill each other to fill it.

Khonsu's attacks led to fifteen civil wars in the following weeks, three campaigns of religious persecution, and four annexations of countries by their more powerful neighbours.

Tohu never killed a single person.

It simply flew.

And sang.

The longest it ever stayed in one place was two seconds. Some of those stops were caught on camera or had witnesses, but many were not, guided as it was by the Simurgh's limited omniscience.

Its actions were the greatest source of paranoia the world could have imagined.

How did you know it hadn't stopped in your town? Your friends, family, and pets could have been influenced, and you would have no idea. At least with the Simurgh, all you worried about was the city attacked.

Now?

The whole world could be against you.

Trust no one, not even yourself.

Hope, so tenderly cultivated in the wake of the Simurgh's death, was struck low once more.

What did it matter if every Endbringer died if another could appear at any moment?

What good were heroes if they were as vulnerable as everyone else?

What was the point of carrying on in the wake of Heartbreak?

Heartbreak was a day of loss, a day to mourn.

The Fourth Miracle was a day of rest, a day to recuperate. A day to lay the

foundations upon which to rebuild.

Everything that came after?

Those were just the regular day in a world beset by powers much greater than those living on it.

******

Humming to himself, Nathaniel Essex marvelled at what a great day it was.

It all seemed so simple. Why hadn't he thought of this idea before?

His goal had always been the evolution of humanity as a whole to the perfect species, so why had he been thinking so small?

Well, no more. He had all the tools at hand and hadn't even realized it.

Had he been a more expressive man, he might have face palmed at his idiocy, but the mutant geneticist simply kept humming.

He was almost done here.

Cadmus had been an investment that had paid off with the boar. It wasn't needed anymore and, in fact, was now a liability. But it could still prove its use as a testing ground. This last experiment was the perfect example.

Essex watched the monitors of the underground facility, the fighting and the dying on the screens less interesting to him than the method.

Some still looked human, others were slobbering beasts, and a rare few were something else entirely.

Better.

Sure, some subjects had regressed into animalistic monsters instead of ascending, but that was to be expected.

Some people were just lesser than others.

Essex didn't care if ninety-nine percent of subjects died. That was how evolution worked, after all. A superior species would supplant the old one. The survivors would breed, develop, and the cycle would continue.

That was how the world should be.

How the world would be.

Another monitor showed a Maneating Boar feasting on the remains of its guards.

It wasn't the original, just a clone. But that was the wonderful thing about the *Blood.*

Those that consumed enough of it would, in turn, start to produce it.

A few clones, a Mister Sinister specialty, of the beast glutted upon the blood of the original, and he had an infinite supply of the liquid.

Enough for an entire world, desperate for a means to defend themselves.

An increase in strength, speed, endurance, and instant healing?

Superpowers in a blood red vial.

A world of test subjects.

Humming a song to himself, all three eyes focused on the screen, Nathaniel Essex dreamed of mankind's next great step.

Ascension.

******

Her smile never faded.

She could not allow it to.

Not allow herself to feel despair, fear, or loneliness. She could not fall to guilt, shame, or failure.

If Valerie Richards ever lost her smile, she would not be Valerie Richards anymore.

So she smiled as the world ended.

She could not feel hope either.

All she allowed herself to feel was curiosity.

When would Mikael be here?

******

Lured by the call of Life, the Pheonix winged its way toward Earth.

Lured by the call of Death, Mikael flew to a small deli.

******

"You have a lot of nerve," I said as I sat at the booth. I was honestly surprised they were open. But even the end of the world wouldn't stop people from needing to pay rent. "Meeting me here? Now? Are you trying to piss me off?"

"You're early," Death said in light surprise. "You should not be able to sense me until you reach Tier 11."

She was different again, no longer looking like Death the Endless. Still dark-haired, still pale skinned and dressed in black, but that was where the similarities ended. She looked more like a Victorian widow coming from a funeral with her long dress and gloved hands holding a cup of tea than the punk rock look of her lesser aspect.

“I didn’t,” I waived down a waitress, tentacles disguised as a hand under an illusion. “Some crystal ball bullshit. Only with more eyes.”

“Ah,” the Embodiment of the End nodded as I placed my order.

“Shouldn’t you have known? You know, with the whole omniscient thing?”

“Anything interacting with you directly, or happening within your pocket dimension, is invisible to me. Has been since you finished your sentence.”

I was silent for a moment, gathering my thoughts.

The minutes stretched on. Death drank her tea and watched the rain fall outside as I watched her.

There was so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to ask.

When I received my order, a steaming cup of mate, I took a deep whiff of the blend.

It smelled like home.

I had not had mocha mint mate in over thirty-five million years.

This deli was one of the few things that remained the same in this world and my home. A cute thing of hardwood, good food, and friendly staff.

It was also the front of a religious organization that was legally, I am told, ‘not a cult.’

After the first sip, I set down my cup.

“You set me up.”

“I did.”

“The Company set me up.”

“They did.”

“I set myself up.”

“You did.”

I took another sip, trying to sort out all my feelings.

Death decided to elaborate.

“Three parties sat at that table. Three parties planned to screw the other two over. Three parties succeeded. The Company screwed you over by trapping you in the cell and tainting any relationship you could have with your bonds by their control over you. You will never be free of the risk they pose. The Company screwed me over by taking everything, all the quadrillions of credits I had accumulated and spent on the exception for you and placing me in a situation where you do not want to help me.”

“Because you needed to screw me over too.”

“The loss of memories about the deal did not target you,” Death nodded. “It targeted me. This meant I needed to set things up to manipulate you to free yourself without knowing you were doing so. And when you got the memories back, you would know I had done so. Any relationship we might have had would be ruined.”

“Because I hate being manipulated.”

That, more than anything else, was my own hypocrisy. Someone who takes joy in manipulating others should be prepared to face the same outcome.

I couldn’t help hating things that I hated, just as most people couldn’t help liking what they liked.

I liked manipulating people.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t susceptible to it.

When I found whoever set me against the gods, who put my Family in danger while they distracted and used me, I would make their suffering a thing of legends.

Less because of the manipulation and more because of the danger they place my Family in.

“Before you took the deal, you had no protections from foreknowledge. Both the Company and I could predict your future. Would you like to know what it was?”

“I can imagine,” I sighed, taking a sip. “But go ahead.”

“You would have remained trapped in that cell for centuries.” My tentacle tightened hard enough to crack my mug. “You would have gone mad, but not hollow. A different kind of madness. A necessary one. Aided by your Life Element, you would have spent that entire time developing your mind and will after giving up on escape. Completely alone, you would wait for your chance. With infinite time, it was inevitable that, eventually, the door would fall. In this case, an asylum demon would shatter your wall, killing you after you lured it in. But you’d be free of the cell. From there, defeating Gwyn and lighting the fire would take another seventy-six years. Your time in the cell, as well as the longer time for your journey, would have fortified your will enough to last in the kiln till the next chosen would take up your duty.”

“And the rest of the games?” I asked out of morbid curiosity.

“Much the same as what actually happened,” Death waived away the question. “The Dark Souls worlds would have been practically identical.”

“Elden Ring?”

“Some slight differences,” Death nodded. “You would not have been able to use faith, unaware as you were of your true body, and since you lacked any knowledge that you were recruited by the Company, you would not have been able to bind Ranni.”

Death didn’t need to say anything else. From there, I could puzzle out the rest.

“I would have fallen in love with Melina anyway. After so long alone, I would have been even more desperate for companionship.” I was a loner, an introvert by nature, but I was still human. I still craved love, affection, and companionship like everyone else. “I would have wanted to stop then. To live in that world with her and not risk beating the

game and moving on to the next. Melina would never have allowed that, driven by her purpose. I would have had to follow her or risk losing her. And she would still have burned."

"From there, you would have claimed the Elden Ring, slain Marika, and moved on to Bloodborne. I told you at that table, Bloodborne was where I was placing my bets."

"But it wasn't my unfamiliarity with Elden Ring that would have driven me to seek my freedom," I sighed. "It would be the loss of Melina. I would be completely alone. Without knowledge of the Catalogue or your involvement. I would have done anything and everything."

Even the few lives I had saved in Yharnam would not have been spared from a version of myself who had lost everything like that.

"You would have absorbed every drop of blood in that city, the labyrinths below, and the nightmares overhead. You would have reached the max level, been freed, and returned to the island where you would remember the truth. And discover the last trap the Company had planted. In your fear of their control over you, of being trapped again, you would have released all ten women without ever knowing them, and they would have died. Moved on to the afterlives, if they exist, of their home worlds that are long gone. Everything you signed up for and every wish you had initially worked for turned to ash by your hand. A true monkey's paw."

Her voice was conversational as if she was talking about the weather and not a nightmare that could have come to pass.

I could see it all, knew myself enough to know that is precisely what would have happened.

It wouldn't have been pretty.

"I was going to screw you over to manipulate you to your Freedom. All that heartbreak and pain would have been the sword to break your chains," Death took another sip. "I was going to screw the Company over by bringing Melina back. As a Tier 12 with Company access, they cannot predict me. Melina would have never been bound, so she never fell under their purview. Nor would she need to be bound. Already immortal, she would be someone with you that you didn't need to fear, side-stepping the second trap. It would have been bittersweet, but you would have had your happy ending. Ideally, my actions would have allowed us to work together, despite the bad blood. Cordial, but not friends."

Despite the dark subject, I smiled as I sipped my mate.

"But I screwed both of you over."

"You fell in love," Death nodded. "We could not predict your trick of sending your

bonds to the past, as it occurred after you were Free and had your Elements. That one choice, that one action, changed everything. Robin gave you the idea to escape early after Emma gave you the determination to perform such an extreme act. They also trained you, shortening the time it would have taken. It was almost a disaster, but Diana's 'order' kept you sane through the kiln. Because of their existence, you were receptive enough to Ranni, who you wouldn't have met at the Moonlight Alter without knowledge of the Catalogue pushing you past the idea of monogamy with Melina. Ranni, in turn, was there to help you recover after the loss of Melina. And in Bloodborne, Emma was the means to escape."

"And since Melina has been bound, you've lost your leverage over me."

"I never intended to hold her hostage," Death shook her head. "I need you to aid me willingly. But, yes, your love for the others reduced the gratitude you would feel for me bringing her back."

"No, it doesn't," I declared firmly. "No matter what else happens or happened in the past, I will never forget that."

I hated being manipulated, but I also wasn't blind to blessings.

My hypocrisy only went so far.

"That is… heartening," Death said after a moment's pause. "As I said, I have been unable to observe you directly since you've been freed. All I have to go on is my predictions from the revised scenario while you were still trapped. They are relatively accurate but not as exact as I am used to. I have been forced to observe you through intermediaries, and even then, only when you are off your Island."

"Is that why it took you so long to call me?" I asked, finishing my drink and waiting for a refill. "You were afraid I wasn't grateful enough to hold up my end of the deal?"

"That," Death nodded. "And once you were Tier 11, you would have had more leverage in our negotiation, making you more secure and trusting. As I said, I need you. You do not need me anymore."

"Why do you need me, exactly?" At her arched eyebrow, I clarified. "I know you want me to bind, which will free you from the limits of your Tier, but what does that mean?"

She thought for a moment as I got my new drink, sipping it slower than the first.

"I am Death."

"Repeating yourself doesn't clear things up," I snarked.

"I have told you before that I am not Death of the Endless, Lady Death, or any version you know. I am all of them and none of them. I am Death. The End." I could practically hear the capitalization in the last word. "I am there at the End of all things. When anything is destroyed, I am there. When any life is snuffed out, I am there. By that nature, I am also there for all beginnings, for a beginning is but the End of what came before."

“Omnipresent, got it. But what comes after that on the tiers? Why put so much effort into all this?”

“I do not ask you to raise my Tier,” Death corrected. “I simply ask you to free me. I am present for all beginnings and ends. Including mine.”

“The Doctor Manhattan problem,” I nodded with dawning horror.

“I would liken it more to an Eren Yeager problem,” Death pursed her lips in thought. “On a much grander scale.”

I suddenly felt a much greater companionship for Death.

“That sucks,” I said in the understatement of the century. “So you are trapped, living out your birth, your life, and end at all times.”

“In a manner,” she hedged. “I am not human. I perceive the world differently than you. I do not die so much as I cease. When my corner of the omniverse disappears, as large as it is, I will as well, for there will be nothing left to reach its End. I do not believe I would have minded such an existence if I didn’t know there was more out there. Bliss in ignorance.”

Nothing lasts forever.

Everything ends.

Even the personification of Death will eventually be gone when nothing is left to die.

“The first knowledge I had that there was more out there was when some random soul ended up in one of my worlds. A soul completely unfamiliar to me, which should be impossible. That was the first time I considered the possibility of things greater than me.”

“The Company?”

“One of their agents,” Death agreed. “Someone who filled out a catalogue similar to you. A being of voracious sexual appetite. I watched them for centuries until they angered the wrong god by sleeping with their wife and getting killed. So certain were they of their ‘chosen one’ status they never considered they could lose. With the knowledge I had gained from them, I reached out to the Company. Eons later, here I am. Infinitely close to my Freedom.”

“So you don’t want more power, just removing your shackles. And I, whose Element was granted by a higher being but no longer bound to them, am the key. You needed me to be a Black Mark, so they wouldn’t interfere later.”

Death was sneakier than I suspected. Who knew?

“One of the many reasons I chose you,” Death nodded. “Everything from here on will be entirely dependent on your actions. I have stacked the deck. You need just play your cards.”

“You really did,” I sighed. “Doomsday, Trigon, the Endbringers, the Council of

Skyfathers, and whoever manipulated me. All in a few months. Interesting times indeed. I do not suppose you will tell me who that last one is?"

"I shall provide no help, no information," Death insisted. "Neither directly or indirectly. There is no Lady Death, Chosen of Death, Black Racer, or embodiment of my power. The closest is your bond, Priscilla, and she is far from an avatar of death yet. As of yesterday, no gods of death remain on this planet either. Everything, the good and the bad will depend on you. That is the only way you can grow. No one to blame, no one to thank."

"For someone who wants to be free so bad, you aren't helping yourself," I sighed. The Wuxia method of training. Wonderful.

"I could be free this instant if you would stop holding yourself back."

I didn't have anything to say to that.

It was true.

"Did you know why I only released the Defences in this last year?"

"So you could observe me?"

"That is why I held onto them, but why did I wait for thirty-five million years to release you from your 'sentence'?"

"Power."

"Power," Death nodded. "Inexhaustible means your well never runs dry. Dragon Heritage means your well grows as you age. In my predictions, after you freed yourself from Bloodborne and spent a few centuries on your Island in accelerated time with Melina, as I promised, you would be freed from your sentence and ascend to Tier 11 immediately. You would have met all the requirements. But you didn't. A Tier 11 might have the same power as a Tier 10. Both are theoretically infinite. The difference is in the nature of their being."

"But I didn't change my nature," I sighed. "I chose to stay myself."

A choice I might not have made if I had gone through everything she had said.

"You remain your own greatest barrier."

"Story of my life," I snarked with a wry smile. "I guess you are out of luck then. I am not giving up on myself. I like me. My wives like me. I am going to be forever a tier 10. Maybe I should make a T-shirt?"

"I cannot control you, and if that is your decision, then I am indeed out of luck." Death did not sound sad, just matter of fact as her pitch-black eyes stared into mine. "I shall only say this. There are multiple ways to achieve Tier 11. The tier system is just the Company's way of classifying beings but power, usefulness, or nature. It is not the be-all-end-all. Especially not for you. You have no limits. You are truly free. Free to become who

you wish to be. All I can hope for now is that you do not disappoint me and will one day fulfill your promise to free me."

"Answer this last question, and I will tell you if I will." I stared back into those pools of the void. "Will you bring back Millicent if I ask?"

I did not love Millicent.

Not as I did Melina or any of my other wives. Nor was she as close to me as Solaire, Andre, Patches, or a few others had been.

But more than anyone, I owed the redheaded Valkyrie.

Owed her for her words, which guided me toward Freedom.

Owed her for a lie I could not tell her, the trust I could not place in her.

Owed her for my Wall.

"I will not," Death shook her head, and my heart fell. "I do not say this out of inability or out of cruelty. I say this because I have already offered to do so. I offered revival to two people from Elden Ring, not one. I had hoped it would make up for the loss. But only one accepted. And I will not deny someone their End. That is as much against my nature as asking you to enslave someone would be against yours."

"I see," I sighed in melancholy.

I had always believed that death was a rest.

I could mourn her loss, even as I respected her choice.

Life was as cruel as it was beautiful.

I could not take away that choice from her, even if I wished I could have shown the beauty behind the cruelty.

"If I ever find a way to Tier 11 without losing myself, I will free you."

Even after the manipulation, the confession, and the lack of help. Even after all that, I could never begrudge someone a wish for Freedom.

I had done much worse in the search for mine.

"Thank you," Death nodded, and we both sat silently, finishing our drinks and watching the rain.

I got up to leave. My wives would be waiting for me.

I knew I would find her here if I ever wanted to talk to Death again.

Before I had left the table to teleport home, Death's voice called me with a question of her own.

"Was it worth it?" Death asked. "Even after everything. All the pain, fear, and loss. Was it worth it? Would you do it again, knowing what it would cost?"

"In a heartbeat," I said. "Every second was worth it. Dark Souls. The Kiln. Elden Ring. Bloodborne. Doomsday. Trigon. Gods. All the death and destruction. After all that, nothing

has changed the fact that I have never been happier."

I left Death and returned to my Family.

Author's Note:

And so ends volume 2.

Not with a bang but with a new day. One filled with questions, hope, fear, and love.

Volume 3 will be the last.

The first chapter of which will be released on August 18th.

For these three weeks, I will be working with Old Man of the Mountain, who has been very helpful as a sounding board, to clean up the older chapters. The story will not change, but I will eliminate most typos and clean up the prose. Some much-needed editing.

If I have the time and inspiration, I might write a few omakes, but I cannot promise a consistent schedule.

Today's chapter is released early thanks to the overwhelming support you all showed last week, as well as it being my birthday. Not counting Author's notes, the end of Volume 2 makes the word count at around 475k words, which I began in June last year. 408 days. Averaging about 1.2k words a day. Your support, advice, and ideas have been critical factors in Rapturous Rhapsody becoming what it is.

Thank you all.

I will see you in a few weeks.

PS: The last song choices for Volume 2 for those interested.

Tribunal 1: Beautiful Cruel World (Utsukushiki Zankoku na Sekai), Yoko Hikasa

Tribunal 2: The Man Who Sold The World, Midge Ure

Tribunal 3: I Remember You, Eilen Jewell

Tribunal 4: Through the Fire and the Flames, Dragonforce

Tribunal 5: Close in the Distance, Masayoshi Soken

Tribunal 6: Shed No Grace On Me, JT Music

Tribunal 7: Child of Evil (Akuma no Ko), Higuchi Ai

Epilogue: The Last Goodbye, Billy Boyd.

PSA: GOD IN COMICS

A: Gonna be honest, this one rubs me the wrong way. Yeah I know in Marvel (and maybe DC?) he's nerfed as hell, but Vishnu is the kind of god who really shouldn't be sitting with scrubs like Zeus. Vishnu in pretty much every myth is flat out God just like the Christian one. Should've been Indra here instead, since the attitude shown by Vishnu here is actually what Indra would do.

He's also extremely, extremely out of character throughout this chapter and the next. I mean, in all myths, he's actually the one god actually and actively looking out for mortals, even reincarnating as a mortal multiple times whenever the Earth is in danger. He even punishes other gods when they try to bully mortals. I can't recall even one time he's ever arrogantly lorded his power over humans.

I don't know how Marvel or DC portrays him, but this is very OOC, considering that most versions of Vishnu in the myths *wants* humans to become enlightened and ascend to higher realms.

Q: I usually let you guys make your own inferences from the work but this one actually points out an issue I struggle with so I'm going to weight in.

I completely agree with you.

I like mythology and history, eastern and African especially since it is so rarely represented in the west, unlike Greek, Roman, Norse, and (to a lesser extent) Egyptian. They also have some very creative ideas. Pretty much everyone in Hindu myth falls into the categories of 'OP Plz nerf,' with other Asian cultures not being far behind.

The problem is that comics are incredibly US centric. Marvel and DC began in the early/mid 20th century when racial profiling, world wars, and the Cold War were in full effect. This was before the internet and most people had absolutely zero clue about other cultures.

You might have also noticed that very few international heroes get screen time. The simple reason is there aren't a lot of them. Especially not from china as is historically an antagonist in comics.

Heck, I think the first appearance of the OG council of sky fathers was in 1980. It was considered incredibly inclusive because Vishnu was on the same level as as Odin and Zeus and other cultures were listed. This ignores the fact that it was only males, with goddesses being in another council entirely. I listed in the chapter that Amaterasu would be a better fit for the Japanese slot, being a goddess of the sun, but the listed Izanagi instead.

Anyway, this is a long way of saying that if I want to stick as close to the characters as possible I am limited to how they are portrayed. Which is very euro or American centric. Of course Zeus is the strongest, because America leans heavily on the Greek aesthetic and heritage. As sad as it is to say, I think even DxD has a better portrayal of hindu gods than most comics.

Power level wise, I think if the Skyfathers had gone in with full power and preparation, and fully ambushed him, even Mikael would have lost. None of them are the strongest beings in their universes, not even close, but they are experienced and have even fended off the likes of the Phoenix Force and other multiverses level enemies in the past.

The problem was they didn't go in prepared.

They had no idea of his relative strength. Yes, they knew the Godslaying blade was a threat and he had killed gods before. But there can be a gulf between gods as wide as the difference between Superman and someone like Green Arrow. All they had seen of Mikael was his size, his weapons, and his tricks against Trigon.

All impressive, but not enough to convince them Mikael is a threat. So why not recruit him? These beings don't care if humans get strong, for the most part. They only cared that something that seemed openly hostile to them (from all his rhetoric about killing gods) had such a weapon at hand. We only saw things from his perspective, but their views were founded on logic. An arrogant logic, but one with a basis.

When I was writing the scenes with them I seriously considered writing some long, drawn out fights to demonstrate how OP they could be. But the truth is, that isn't how Mikael fights. He doesn't give time for transformation sequences or long speeches. He's been in the losing end so often he never had the luxury against anything that posed a threat. The only exception is when it is part of a larger plan, which he didn't have since the gods surprised him, or when the opponents aren't threats, which they categorically were.

Mikael doesn't have the luxury of being able to lose fights anymore. He has to win, because he knows he isn't coming back if his body get destroyed. That means he does things quick, efficiently, and brutally.

Anyway, sorry for the long ramble but I felt I need to get my rational out there.

Omakes

OMAKE I

Robin took a deep sip of her coffee, stepping from the mansion's kitchen.

Artoria and Diana were out in the field practicing in the darkness of the early morning. Ranni was locked in her room, keeping up her act of being Mikael's 'Guiding Moonlight' as he flew through space.

Everyone else was still asleep in these early morning hours.

Perfect for watching the sunrise with a fresh cup of coffee and a good book.

It was shaping up to be a good day.

Robin stopped when she made her way to the front door as she witnessed a curious sight through the glass doors.

It was small, barely up to Robin's knee.

It was shaped like a humanoid squid, with half a dozen chubby tentacles acting as legs and four more stubby limbs as pseudo arms. Its head was bulbous, too big for its body, with large black eyes.

Said black eyes were narrowed in concentration as it hopped up and down on its tiny limbs, trying to reach the door knob.

Up and down it went, small limbs waving frantically at the handle that remained a good foot out of reach.

How cute.

Its black eyes narrowed in concentration, a tiny tongue sticking out of its mouth as it jumped one more time. This time a small platform formed in the air under it allowing it to hop mid-air and grab the handle.

The baby squid hung there for a second, its weight not enough to unlatch the door. It bounced up and down, the motion giving enough momentum for the handle to turn and the glass door to swing inward, the doll-like creature hanging on for dear life.

It fell to the floor inside the lobby with a little 'splotch', and took a moment to pump its minuscule arms in triumph.

How cute.

Its little celebration done, it scuttled its way toward the stairs with surprising speed, chubby tentacles sweeping across the tiled floor.

The squid creature almost reached the stairs, but in its haste, it tripped over itself, tumbling end over end and coming to a stop upside down at the foot of the first step.

"Owwww," it whined in a familiar voice. Its black eyes started to water pitifully as its stubby tentacle arms rubbed its bruised head.

“Ara?” When had Robin approached?

Never mind.

Mikael’s wide-eyed look sent the Strawhat’s way as she leaned over his crumbled form held more than a little fear.

How cute.

“I need an adult,” he squeaked, eyes still watering from pain and looking extremely pitiful.

“I am an adult.”

Robin paid no attention to Mikael’s tiny body flailing in distress as she scooped him up and squeezed him close.

Best.

Day.

Ever.

Author's Note:

Had some free time today so banged out this short omake in 30 minutes or so. Not canon, as I said, but something the comments inspired and had me chuckling.

I have a few more Side Stories planned for this week and next, as well as a few short omakes like this. I'll post them as I write them on the forums and bundle them together in a bach for the other sites.

OMAKE II: KNOW THY ENEMY

“Are you the man who has wed our King?” Gawain asked, arms crossed. I was pretty tall, but this gorilla of a man out-massed me by quite a bit.

“He is,” Tristain answered, strumming his bow/harp Failnaught menacingly. How he knew who I was, I couldn’t tell. His eyes were closed.

“You look strong, at least,” Lancelot said, palm resting on the hilt of Arondight.

All three Knights of the Round Table surrounded me, ready to launch an attack at the slightest twitch of my muscles. These were some of the finest warriors ever produced in the Nasuverse.

One-on-one, I might be able to take any of them.

Two-on-one, if I pulled out all my tricks and got very lucky, I could theoretically eke out a win.

Three-on-one? Against the greatest knights of the round table? At high noon? Without setting up traps ahead of time? Without returning to my main body?

I was screwed.

“What makes you think you are worthy of the hand of our King?” Gawain growled, magic power gathering as he absorbed the sun’s power.

“Our perfect King,” Tristain interjected, his fingers speeding up. The twang of the strings started to ring in my ears.

“You must overcome us if you wish for our blessing,” Lancelot drew his sword, ready for battle.

I needed to defeat them.

Not because I wanted their approval or anything like that. I didn’t need permission from anyone to do anything. My relationship with Artoria was a matter of The Family and nobody else.

No, I needed to defeat some of the greatest combatants in the world because they were annoying me.

To do so, I had to use my most devastating weapon.

My words.

Slowly, so they wouldn’t react before I was ready, I dipped my hand into my pocket.

As I did, I launched my first attack.

“I have a harem.”

All three knights flinched.

“Of thirteen mature women.” As I followed up my first attack with another, causing

them to flinch again, I removed my ultimate weapon.

"A third of them are widows." They physically staggered backwards.

"You… lie," Lancelot gasped.

Using my weapon, I dealt the first of two blows I knew would win this fight.

I held up my phone, a photo of The Family proudly displayed.

All three knights groaned, their teeth grinding audibly.

"Two of them were mothers."

Tristain started weeping.

Time for the final blow.

I held up my phone once more.

All three collapsed to their knees.

Their eyes were wide and wet.

"It's… beautiful," Gawain gasped in awe.

"How?" Lancelot wailed.

"Are you… God?" Tristain desperately asked.

"I am not god. I am," I paused, searching for the right words to finish them off even as I held up the photo of Artoria in her Bunny Suit. "Everything you wish you could be."

""""We are unworthy!""""

They cried, bowing at the picture and me.

I smiled.

Flawless Victory.

Author's Note:

The worst of the move is behind me, so have a tiny omake as a reward. I still have unpacking and a bunch of stuff, so it will still be a SS at the end of the week, but next week will be back to our complete chapters.

OMAKE III: RESPECT YOUR TEACHERS

“I think my ovaries just exploded,” her sister said.

“Yaaannnnggggg,” Ruby Rose whined in disgust even as she kept her eyes on the ‘fight’.

If you can call a giant white dragon sitting on a much smaller dragon (the size of a mountain) a fight.

“How uncouth,” Weiss snorted. Then she paused. “Then again, the brilliance of his scales, that pristine white glow. It is beautiful.”

“I want his babies,” Blake deadpanned.

“Blaaaaakkeee!” Ruby whined again as she watched the white dragon elbow drop onto the massive Grimm, shaking the earth. This was sooo cool. “Don’t say that. He’s married!”

“To like thirteen women,” Yang snorted. “If he keeps that many happy, he must be doing something right. I’m sure he could handle a few more.”

“Woah,” Nora was practically bouncing in place as Mikael suplexed the Grimm into the mountains. No. Wait. She was actually bouncing. “Miss G really lucked out. Ya think he could teach us to do that in class? Like a super secret technique only taught to the best team as they graduate?”

“Unlikely,” Pyrrha chimed in as they watched the Grimm dragon try and claw and bite at their teacher’s husband. The white dragon kept a hand on its head at a distance, preventing its ‘short’ arms (longer than most cities) from reaching it. Mikael faked a yawn. “It has to be a semblance of some sort, right?”

“Is that a Leviathan?” Jaune asked, looking pale.

“And Sea Feilong,” Lie Ren nodded calmly. He was done with this shit. “And a heard of Megoliaths.” **“Gae Bolg Alternative!”** “Never mind. Shishou got the Megoliaths.”

Ruby almost passed out when she saw her teacher’s awesome spear rain down upon the herd of massive elephant-like Grimm.

“Rhongomyniad!”

“By Oum!” Jaune jumped in fright as a tower of light, shaped like a spear and bigger than a mountain, crashed into the ocean and vaporized the massive Grimm in a shower of steam and surging tidal waves.

“I told you!” Nora shouted joyfully as they watched Diana turn into a red dragon and tackle a Wyvern from the air. “It’s totally a super-secret-aura technique. I want to turn into a Sloth-Dragon!”

“All I’m saying is think of the babies,” Yang said with a smile, more teasing than serious. “Actual dragon babies. That make puns!”

“You cannot be allowed to breed,” Weiss said, looking haunted.

“I disagree,” an unfamiliar voice said, and a firm hand landed on Yang’s shoulders, locking her in place. Turning slightly, she caught sight of a face matching her own. Raven. Her absentee mother. “I shall guide you. I seduced your father, after all.”

“Wha?” Yang stuttered, entirely baffled by the situation.

“Think of the grand-babies,” the bandit woman said intensely, mirroring Yang’s earlier words. On she wasn’t joking. “Dragon grand-babies. They will be the strongest.”

“I would request a word with thee,” a refined voice said as a hand was placed upon Raven’s shoulders. The former huntress turned. And looked up. And up. Priscilla looked down. “Upon the sanctity of the vows of matrimony.”

“Meep.”

Fifty feet away, another group was reacting to the giant white dragon scrunching the massive Grimm into a ball and dribbling it.

“Things still going to plan?” Mercury sarcastically asked his boss.

“All according to the Keikaku,” Cinder Fall said malevolently. Those who paid attention could see sweat beading her brow even as she stapled her fingers together.

Keikaku means plan.

“I would hope so,” Medea said, appearing in a swirl of robes. Magic circles surrounded the group. “I would like to look at the little trinket you have in your arm.”

Emerald peed herself.

High up on the tallest tower of the school, a Wizard watched his former secretary arrange a Grimm Tide like legos. If his guess wasn’t wrong, she was recreating Beacon.

The Monstra as the tower was a nice touch.

“Huh,” Ozpin said, taking a deep sip of his hot chocolate. “Neat.”

Author's Note:

After a pretty serious chapter, have a silly omake.

OMAKE IV: IF MIKAEL WAS EVER SUMMONED TO CHALDEA

There was something… off about Chaldea's newest servant, Ritsuka thought as she and Mash watched him walk down the hall while whistling innocently.

How suspicious.

"Senpai! Mikael replaced all of Holmes' Void Dust with powdered sugar!"

Learning about her servants had saved her life and human history more times than she could count. Most Servants were either known to her thanks to her… extensive lessons in mythology, or they had met in a Lostbelt or Singularity. Those utterly unfamiliar to Rituska required a more in-depth study and evaluation before the Last Master felt confident in using a new Servant to the greatest effect.

Still, grasping who this one was was proving more difficult than usual.

If there was one thing she had learned after all these years, all servants were bullshit. But 'Mikael' was odd in a wholly different way. Odd and worrying.

"Senpai! Mikael and Anastacia are fighting another prank war!"

Mikael did plenty of absurd things, as all servants did, whether it was his cooking (Benni-enma had cried), his friends (Who on earth holds a singing contest with Nero and the Lizs then decides to watch anime with Blackbeard), to his hobbies (Ritsuka never thought being annoyingly petty was a hobby until now. His interactions with Kama were particularly hilarious).

And that was not even considering his romantic relationships.

"Senpai! Mikael started a wrestling program with Quetzalcoatl and Astraea! And he's having Ishtar, Caren and the Queen of Sheba hold a betting pool!"

Ritsuka had no idea how he had done it but had somehow ended up in a romantic relationship with an absurd number of women. She could sort of understand Medea and Medea Lily, as well as all Scathach and Skadi. They came from more sexual cultures than hers, so polygamy might not seem too weird to them.

What really blew Ritsuka's (and everyone else's) mind was that he had managed to seduce Artoria.

Every Artoria.

There were a lot of Artorias.

Some of which hated each other with an absolute passion.

Archer (Emiya, since that wasn't a clear description anymore) thought it was some

new True Magic. Or he bribed them with food.

The knights of the Round started off as wary, then became best friends with him. How Ritsuka didn't know, all she knew was that they practically worshiped the ground he walked on.

"Senpai! Mikael is drinking with Lancelot, D'Eon, and Napoleon! They're speaking French!"

If Mikael was just a playboy, even if a good one, then she and her Mashmallow wouldn't be spying on him. After all, Furgus existed. (Ritsuka was sure Caladbolg was powered by pure 'horny'.)

But he wasn't.

He had, on multiple occasions, turned down sexual relations with other servants. (While seeing him literally throw Kiara out of his room with a cry of 'begone thot!' had been funny, Ritsuka still considered him chasing Medb through the halls with a whip of string cheese to be better.) Even if a woman he liked, such as Gorgon, Medusa, Nero, or Ibuki, expressed interest, he would kindly but firmly turn them down.

What does 'I won't cheat on my wives' mean when you sleep with twenty women? Even if fourteen are versions of the same woman!

If anything, he was disgustingly romantic. When he wasn't taking women on 'dates' in the simulator, he was always cuddling with one or more of them or helping with their hobbies.

"Senpai! Mikael challenged Moriarty and Holmes to deduce which was better, AC or DC, while Edison and Tesla were also in the cafeteria. And then he started chanting Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap in the background!"

And then there were his stats. They were all over the place! High magic and NP stats with poor physical (except Endurance) usually meant a caster or long-range fighter. But Mikael fought with weapons, not spells, for the most part.

And don't even get her started on his skills!

'Eye of the Mind (True)' wasn't unusual at all, though A++ was the highest she had seen. 'Existence Outside the Domain EX' was rare, but it wasn't unknown either. 'Godslayer EX' was rarer, but Muramasa had it as well.

Ritsuka could understand 'Talented B'. It was like Imperial Privilege, but instead of giving instant access to other skills, it multiplied the learning rate. Less instantly helpful, but better the longer Mikael was summoned and the more teachers he had.

"Senpai! Mikael is teaching the child servants!"

That was where the familiar, if odd, ended, and the madness began.

'Inexhaustible' was broken, plain and simple. It not only raised his MP and Endurance

to EX levels, but it also ensured that he would never die unless he was killed instantly. That skill alone would put anyone in the upper class of servants. It also meant he generated all the power he needed, not drawing anything from Chaldea or her, which was great.

"Senpai! Mikael's cat and Fou are plotting something again! The Konyanskyas, Kiaras, Kamas, Tiamat, and Draco are all running away! Merlin is in hiding!"

What wasn't great was 'World Ender C+'.

Also not heartening was 'Trail of Ashen Tears'. It didn't have a rank, so it was a personal skill, and Ritsuka was a bit too worried to ask what it meant.

"Senpai, Mikael is bullying Jason… I don't think we need to do anything."

But what truly had Ritsuka on guard was his Noble Phantasms.

Many servants had multiple NPs. Hell, Artoria had a dozen or so in her various iterations, so him having two was nothing out of the ordinary.

'Dragon of Freedom and Life' was like a ramped-up version of Sieg's Akafiloga All-Grid. Powerful and destructive like all Anti-World Noble Phantasms, it would also never be used. So long as Mikael never deployed it, he would keep returning even if his body was destroyed, making him immortal.

"Senpai! Mikael is making puns with Jaguarmura-sensei! We're DOOMED!"

Ritsuka and Mash followed Mikael, determined to learn more about him, because of his second and final Noble Phantasm.

Like his other Noble Phantasm, 'Break Out!' was self-targeting. But unlike Dragon of Freedom and Life, it could be used on anything he touched.

If there was ever an anti-Master Noble Phantasm, this was it. It not only made him immune to all control effects like charm, sleep, bindings, or boundary fields, but it also meant Command Seals did not work on him or anyone he was touching.

Nothing could control him.

Nothing could stop him.

Mikael might not be the strongest servant, but he was definitely the most troublesome. If he ever turned against Human Order, they were doomed.

"Senpai," Mash tugged on Ritsuka's sleeve with a luminous blush on her face. "How do I look?"

Her adorable little Mashmallow was wearing what could only be considered a Little Black Dress. Its cut was particularly daring, and the young Demi-servant was squirming in embarrassment.

Ritsuka staggered back from the attack of the Gap Moe.

Critical Hit!

Super Effective!

Ritsuka Fujimaru is unable to battle.

“Good Job!” Ritsuka answered with a thumbs up, wiping the drool from her lips and the blood dripping from her nose. “Where did you get that?”

“Ms. Medea made it for me,” Mash answered with a radiant smile as her embarrassment faded. “Mikael asked her to make it for me as an apology for all the trouble he caused us both. Though I don’t know where your gift is.”

“I know where it is,” Ritsuka answered as her eyes devoured her cute little Kohai.

Mikael might be suspicious and a little troublesome, but he was still her servant, right?

No need to alienate a new and powerful Foreigner when he could be a great ally, right?

If he could convince two Medeas, four Scathachs and fourteen Artorias to all wear Bunny Outfits at once, surely he could convince Mash to wear it once, right?

Author's Note:

Had some free time today, so banged this out in a few hours. For those curious, here is how I would see Mikael's stats:

STR: C
END: EX
AGL: D
MP: EX
LUK: E
NP: EX
Heigh/Weight: 210cm, 106kg
Origin: Fiction
Region: The Void Between The Stars
Alignment: Chaotic-Balanced
Gender: Male
There is no greater ally or foe - Artoria Pendragon (Lancer)

Class Skills:

Existence Outside the Domain EX: A skill denoting Foreigners as those who follow their own logic rather than conforming to the rule of the World.
Personal Skills:

Eye of the Mind (True) A++: A skill that denotes one's ability to read and direct the flow of combat. 'True' Eye of the Mind comes from overwhelming experience rather than inherent ability. It is gained by humans who fight rather than exceptional bloodlines or blessings. Due to his longer-than-normal lifespan, and sheer diversity of fighting experience, it is ranked A++. So long as even a .1% chance of victory exists, this ability significantly improves the chances of winning.
Godslayer EX: Anyone who slays a god gains this skill as it is one of the greatest feats one can accomplish. At EX rank, it marks the holder as the natural predator of the divine. Gods cease to be inconceivable beings in their presence and simply become 'food'. Those with the 'Divinity Trait' will strongly react to the holder in correlation to the rank of Divinity. (Normally, only adverse reactions are possible to this trait, but positive responses are possible in this case thanks to marrying and loving multiple women with the 'divine'

attribute.)

Talented B: The ability to learn at a rate that is impossible for most beings. It is a learning rate multiplier, not direct ability gain like Imperial Privilege. What is impossible to learn, such as racial traits or blessings, is still impossible, so it is ranked B due to the scale and breadth of the Talent. A rank is a domain of learning unique abilities. EX can learn anything at all in seconds to minutes.

Inexhaustible EX: The skill holder's magic level will never fall below this ability's rank. It usually only has a minor effect on Endurance, raising it by one rank, but thanks to the use of healing miracles, Endurance is raised to EX rank as well.

World Ender C+: A skill that denotes the holder as someone whose actions lead to the end of a 'World Order'. Enhances any actions taken in rebellion against 'The World'. This skill is only C+ because he instated new world orders after destroying the old and actively sought the preservation of a few lifeforms rather than complete eradication. B rank is the complete destruction of a 'World'. A Rank is the eradication of multiple 'Worlds'.

Trail of Ashen Tears: A unique skill of Mikael's, one that can be considered a minor Noble Phantasm. It is the manifestation of his unceasing journey toward freedom. Passing through multiple worlds, life and death, heartbreak and loss, and even overcoming his own greatest fears. Nothing can stop his march forward.

Functions like an upgraded Determination of Steel.

Chains of Love (Hidden): Allows Mikael to 'bind' peoples and creatures to him, allowing them to gain various benefits, including immortality, while he lives. Anyone bound can order him to do anything, and he cannot stop them without someone else countermanding the order or releasing his first Noble Phantasm. Using this ability on his Master would ensure victory in any Holy Grail War.

Mikael will only do so if he fully loves and trusts such a special Master.

Noble Phantasms:

{Dragon of Freedom and Life}

Rank: EX

NP Type: Anti-Personnel (Self)/Anti-World

Range: 0

Maximum Targets: 1

A transformation Noble Phantasm. Upon deployment, Mikael assumes his true body of a Dragon so large that it's every movement could doom a planet. Attacks that are Anti-Fortress and below will have no effect due to the sheer size of his body. So long as Mikael is not killed after deploying this Noble Phantasm, he will simply form a new body and

return. It is his greatest strength and weakness, so he will rarely, if ever, use it. (In FGO, it would not be used.)

{Break Out!}

Rank: EX

NP Type: Anti-Personnel (Self)

Range: 0

Maximum Targets: 1-100

No chains can bind him. No barrier can stop him. He can do anything he wants, no matter how others can try and control and restrict him. He is a being with no limits. A passive Noble Phantasm that is always active for Mikael, but actively deploying it will allow it to be extended to anyone touching him.

{Lies of a Human Mask} (Hidden)

Rank: A

NP Type: Anti-Personnel (Self)

Range: 0

Maximum Targets: Infinite

A disguise to hide the monster beneath a mask of human skin. A passive Noble Phantasm that is always activated. It allows Mikael to hide stats, skills and Noble Phantasms from even his Master or those with Clairvoyance. It can even deceive The World into thinking he is a regular servant. It is also a sublimation of all the Defences the Catalogue provided. Releasing the True Name of this Noble Phantasm will dispense with all deception on Mikael's true nature, raising his physical parameters by two ranks. All who see it risk gaining Insight into the Truth of the World. Those unable to handle it shall descend into a maddened Frenzy.

It is only ranked A because other servants with Existence Outside the Domain ranked C or higher know instinctively what sort of being he is.

{Dreams of Distant Family} (Hidden)

Rank: E-A++

NP Type: Unknown

Range: 5 Meters

Maximum Targets: Variable

Somewhere out there, beyond the realms of time, space, and fate, there is an Island.

A hellscape for all invaders.

A blighted land containing dangers that can destroy a World three times over if released.

On that Island is a home. A Family who laughs, loves, and cries together. They, forever connected through this Noble Phantasm, can come to each other no matter the distance

between them.

Summoning Mikael is equivalent to summoning his Family and his Island.

On that Island is a Dragon's Happy Ending.

And Mikael shall never give it up.

Author's Note:

There is the character sheet, as I imagine it. I could have added more if I wanted to be absurd, but this is a good fit. For context, for those unfamiliar with Fate, EX rank does not necessarily mean the strongest. It just means that the level cannot be measured. While this is usually an indicator of strength, it can also mean something is so unique that there is nothing to compare it to.

In a regular Grail War, Mikael would be a broken character, and in Chaldea, he would still be among the top tier, only rivalled by the likes of Void Shiki, Gilgamesh with Ea, or some of the Lostbelt Kings or Beasts. In FGO, he would be a mid-tier 5-star Arts-based Foreigner, Support/Attacker hybrid, specializing in Defence/invincibility pierce with debuff purge and team-buff NP. Useful for boss fights, especially against berserkers, but there are better options if you have them.

OMAKE V: IF MIKAEL TRAVELS TO BLEACH TOO EARLY

“Huh,” I murmured, scratching my head as I tried to decide what to do in this situation.

Travelling the multiverse was fun, but it wasn’t an exact science. When I had promised my wives a visit to versions of their home worlds, I had no idea what version that would be.

As far as I could tell, this was the Bleach world, so I had gotten that right, but in the past.

Way in the past.

So far in the past, humanity had just developed writing.

So I had a few options here.

I could travel to another world, closer in time to ‘canon’ Bleach.

Or I could take a nap.

It was only seven thousand years or so. Adjusting the time on my Island for my Family was as simple as pulling them into another Dream. Less than a second would pass for them.

On the other hand, I could get a short nap at the same time as answering a bunch of questions I had about history. And get some practice with Haki.

“Bedtime,” I said to myself. I folded myself into another fake moon, in a pocket dimension so I wouldn’t melt the brains of the nascent civilizations, and set about ‘resting’.

******

Kurosaki Ichigo liked to think he was brighter than most would expect him to be.

Sure, he might look, and sometimes act, like a thug, but that was only because people kept pissing him off by trying to bully him or his friends.

Sure, he might have invaded both realms of the dead, but that was only because they kept kidnapping those same friends.

So, in that most recent invasion, Kurosaki Ichigo had noticed a few oddities about Hueco Mundo.

Oddities like how the Forest of Menos’ trees looked less like trees and more like spikes.

Oddities like how the upper layer of the world was curved despite its supposedly ‘flat’

nature.

Oddities like how the moon in the sky was always in the same position, no matter how far they travelled.

Oddities like how, as they were preparing to leave for the human realm to stop Aizen after rescuing Orihime, a voice called out a familiar name.

A voice so loud that it literally shook the world.

"Yoruichi?"

Dunes rose and fell in a torrent as the sands of Hueco Mundo shook in a great tumult.

The portal was left behind as the Shinigami reacted with alarm, grabbing hold of their unconscious comrades, or the humans who couldn't fly, and rising into the air.

As a whole, the group watched the area warily, ready for another of Aizen's traps or a new hollow.

So, when a white mountain rose over the horizon, all their eyes snapped to it immediately.

Then it kept rising.

And rising.

Soon, Ichigo realized it was not a mountain but a head on a long sinuous neck.

A head that took up the entire horizon.

A head the same shade of white as a hollow's mask.

"Big," Chad grunted the greatest understatement in the history of mankind.

"**Hmm?**" The Hollow Dragon's questioning hum vibrated their bodies despite being hundreds of miles away. "**What are you all doing here so soon?**"

"Oh dear," Unohana murmured, eyes not leaving the dragon the head the size of a country.

Kenpachi started laughing madly.

"What an interesting specimen," Mayuri cackled with glee before dissolving into murmurs that Ichigo tuned out. For his own sake.

"Why did you say that name?" Byakuya called out loudly. Though he looked the picture of poise and refinement he always did, Ichigo recognized the tenseness in his posture.

He was afraid, the young man realized.

Good, he wasn't the only one.

A Gillian was smaller than one of this thing's scales.

"**Oh, I just thought I felt her here for a second, but it's just that portal,**" the titanic creature rumbled. Its voice was calm, as if talking about the weather. His every breath stirred up a sandstorm on the endless desert. "**Hey, what year is it?**"

“2002.” Orihime chimed in helpfully.

Kenpachi disappeared as he charged the gargantuan Dragon Hollow, laughing the entire way.

“That’s what I thought,” the creature sighed. “Manga, not anime, right. Ah, man, I overslept. They’re never going to let me live this down.”

Kenpachi was still charging.

The dragon was *really* far away.

“Nothing I can do about that now,” it sighed again. “Hold still. I want to get this gunk off.”

The world shook.

For the next minute, the invasion force tried to stay alive as Hueco Mundo came apart around them.

Sand and stone disappeared as Ichigo watched great white wings burst from the ground and shake. He saw the crumbling remains of Las Noches fall and realized the trip from the Menos Forest to the massive building, which had taken so long, had only been the distance of *half* of one wing.

And this thing had *six*.

Below was a genuinely titanic white body coiled around a glittering jewel. Most of the desert fell through the gem onto the lush island below.

“Eh, I guess the Island is getting another dessert,” it shrugged casually. As if it hadn’t just killed pretty much every hollow in existence. “The stronger ones probably survived, though. I’ll have to tell the others to keep an eye out for stray Adjuchas or Vasto Lords.”

Kenpachi was still charging!

The Hollow Dragon blew a puff of air like one would do to an annoying fly, and Kenpachi flew back with the speed of a bullet.

“Give me a second,” it raised a claw the size of a city. “It’s been a few thousand years, but I think I’ve got it this time.”

The moon, once hovering in the sky above their head as usual, descended on them. It shrank as it got closer, until it was ten feet from them and the size of a car.

Then it cracked like an egg.

From that egg, a man emerged.

“Got it right that time!” The man cheered as he emerged from his lunar cocoon. His voice was the same as the dragons, though much quieter.

He was also naked.

And stretching.

“Eep!” Orihime flushed and hid her face in her hands.

“Oh my,” Unohana murmured appreciatively.

“Nemu! Seize him,” Mayuri cried as he withdrew a syringe.

“Yes, Sir,” the lieutenant answered and lunged at the naked man.

The naked man did not seem to acknowledge either of them, though he did reach out to poke the woman as she approached.

Nemu fell to the ground with a loud moan, shuddering and twitching.

“Eep!” Orihime’s flush deepened as she recovered her eyes from peaking.

“Oh my,” Unohana murmured again.

“Those used to pain are rarely so used to pleasure,” the man explained with a nod as he backhanded the 12th division captain. Mayuri flew off towards Kenpachi, crashing into the charging captain. “But where are my manners? The name is Mikael,” he said with a flourishing bow. “I am a big fan of your work as the first Kenpachi, great murdering you did there. And one of my wives would love to speak with you about your healing later.”

Unohana froze, eyes open to their fullest extent for the first time Ichigo had ever seen since meeting her.

“You have something on your back,” Chad pointed out.

“It’s nothing,” the ‘man’ waived off with one hand as he casually sliced the tentacles growing out of his back with the other. “Been some time since I’ve been in a human body. Getting used to it again takes a bit. Back me up, Ichigo. One abomination of nature to another.”

“What?” The strawberry asked, still trying to catch up to the change in his worldview from the last few minutes.

“Don’t worry,” Mikael put a hand on the ginger’s shoulder in solidarity. “We all go through it at one point or another. Part growing that weren’t there before. The changes are natural. Just a sign of growth. I’ll be around to answer any questions you have in this difficult time of your life.”

Ichigo got the distinct impression he was being messed with.

Renji was cackling in the background.

When in doubt, punch it.

“Put some clothes on, you pervert!”

As the words left his mouth, Ichigo realized that might be why this guy was looking for Yoruichi. They were both massive perverts.

“I am not a pervert,” the naked man/dragon/hollow/thing denied as he sidestepped the punch. “I am THE pervert. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a Keikaku to ruin, a pussy to find, and mayhem to cause. Tootles.”

Then the strange, powerful *thing* sauntered through the portal while whistling.

“What just happened?” Ichigo asked.

“I have no fucking clue.”

The entire party took a quick step back.

Finding out the entirety of Hueco Mundo was on the back of a massive dragon and watching it be destroyed was one thing.

But hearing Kuchiki Byakuya swear was just *wrong*.

Author's Note:

This one might have a sequel or two in the future, depending on how inspired the TYBW anime makes me.

OMAKE VI: MIKAEL'S RELATIONSHIP ADVICE FOR HAREM PROTAGONISTS

"Welcome, class," Mikael declared to the assembled group. He wore a tweed suit, a fake moustache, and glasses he didn't need. "To the first multi-dimensional Harem Protagonist course. HP class, for short. Every night for the next month, you will come here in your dreams. We have dedicated classes on various subjects that will be recommended based on your genre. I particularly recommend 'Bad End Avoidance 101' for all of you, as it is a great supplement to this general course. Before I begin, are there any questions?"

There were a lot of questions.

"Did you kidnap us?" Minato Sahashi asked with alarm.

"Kidnapping is such a harsh term," Mikael answered with a sly grin as he used a magic trick to make his glasses glint ominously. "I like to think of it as 'enthusiastic recruitment'."

"Excuse me, sir, who are you?" Emiya Shirou asked politely with a raised hand. He did not notice how, nearby, on two desks, two siblings eyed him with recognition.

Nor did he notice how the sister had his red hair and gold eyes, and the brother had Rin's black hair and blue eyes.

Sometimes, 'Harem Protagonist' was a genetic condition.

"My name is Mikael," he said, adjusting his fake mustache as it began to slip. "I am your instructor for your homeroom. You will get to know each other over your time here. I'm sure you all have a lot to learn, not only from me but also from your other teachers."

"Mikael-sensei," Kamijou Touma asked. "Why am I here? I don't have a harem. I have terrible luck with women."

"If I say you have a harem, then you have one," Mikael declared firmly. "Or at least the possibility for one. If you do not believe you do, you will attend 'Self-Denial and its consequences' with Aizen-sensei. This is not optional. Humility is only a virtue if it doesn't hurt you or those close to you."

"SIR!" Hyoudou Issei shot to his feet, a broad grin on his face. "Please teach me how to get a harem!"

"What if we don't want a harem?" Natsuki Subaru asked with his arms crossed.

Issei looked like someone had killed his dog.

"Monogamy is a valid way of life, as is not engaging in romance at all," Mikael nodded to the young man, his mustache falling off completely. "This course is about

achieving your goals as a harem protagonist. What those goals are, is up to you. Always remember, just because a woman, or man if you are into that, has expressed a romantic interest in you doesn't mean you have to return that interest. It is perfectly fine to have your own preferences, and rejecting someone you are not interested in is better than stringing them along."

"Uh, Mikael-sensei," Aono Tsukune hesitantly asked. "Isn't that mean?"

"No," Mikael lectured. "If you confess to someone you like, do they have to go out with you?" Many in the room shuffled awkwardly, their own history of confessions not giving them much confidence. "If you don't have a judgment one way or another, go on a date or two. That is what dates are for, to find out if people are compatible. By that same nature, if you do not want to date someone, don't date them. Even if it hurts their feelings, so long as you are not cruel, a clean rejection will allow the other party to move on with their lives."

"Finally," Satou Kazuma muttered, resting his head on his crossed arms on his desk. "Some true gender equality."

"There is an exception to this, but you'll learn about it in 'Yandere Survival 104' with Amano Yukiteru. A true veteran of the subject. If you feel you need it, please also take 'No Nice Boats 203' with Ito Makoto. Now we've digressed a bit. Any other questions about the course itself?"

"Umu, what about those of us who are not human?" Ainz Ooal Gown asked imperiously with his boney arms crossed. Inside, Suzuki Satoru was freaking the fuck out.

How had he been summoned here despite all his protections?

How much did this man know?

A harem? He was a skeleton.

Why did that thought bring an image of Albedo screaming 'Bone Daddy!' at him to mind?

"I'd make a boner joke, but I am afraid most wouldn't appreciate it, so I'll leave it dead and buried."

""BOOOO""

More than a few students in the classroom jeered at the pun, but the teacher just took a deep breath with a smile as if breathing in their pain.

"To answer your question, love does not discriminate based on race, gender or creed," Mikael nodded in the direction of several female students, most of who had been looking around curiously and warily. The men outnumbered them, but there were still over a dozen of them. "If you wish a body that can engage in sex with humans, we can work with you to create one for use but love or romance doesn't need sex, so the knowledge we teach

still applies."

"So these lessons will be useful for us as well?" Fujioka Haruhi asked. She wore a boy's uniform, but most of the other women wore the female version.

"It is a Harem Protagonist course. That includes reverse harems," Mikeal nodded. "Some courses are more geared towards certain genders or preferences, such as 'Practical Sex Ed' with Medb or Fergus, or 'Managing Men 202' with Circe, if you choose to take any of them. But you will find most of the lessons will overlap, despite differences in genders. Toxic or abusive relationships can happen to anyone, man or woman. As can healthy polyamorous ones. It depends on the people involved, not their gender.

Take Tsunderes, for example. A staple of many harems. There is a fine line between an outburst of embarrassment and anger and physical abuse. Recognizing that difference is the key to living a long, happy life as a Harem Protag. That will be covered in 'Proper Dere Maintenance 101,' where Helltaker will walk you through identifying various 'Deres' and how to handle them."

"So the course is not about getting a harem but managing the affection of multiple people to ensure proper development?"

"Exactly," Mikael nodded at Nakahara Sunako's question. "As I mentioned, only you can decide what that development is. We are just here to give you the tools to achieve it. Now, we have time for one more question, then we must begin with the first lesson. Yes, Kurosu Yuuki. You've had your hand up for a while."

"Are we the only class here?"

"No, though you will not be interacting with the other classes. You are divided into needs and methods of teaching. This reflects the cultures you come from. Notice how many of you are Japanese in origin? Wuxia or Xianxia require almost entirely different lessons, for example. To say nothing of the School of Hentai. And don't get me started on harems in Fanfiction. That is a mess I am not looking forward to. So the long and short of it is you are not the only Harem Protags out there, but you will not be interacting with others. We want to avoid NTR wars as much as possible."

Turning from the group, Mikael grabbed a folder filled with paper. Then, with an obvious use of magic, he banished it from his hand so the sheets rained down on the class. One fell on each desk, face up in front of all the students.

"This is the course syllabus," he explained, holding a copy of the paper to the group. "Please peruse it at your leisure so you know what to expect. This week will be dedicated to the basics. Stuff you need to know as soon as possible to start improving your lives and those around you. We will primarily focus on communication. The pillar of any good relationship.

Next week we will dive into social conventions. Age of consent, differences in species and cultures, that sort of thing. The third is on, and I can't believe I need to say this, why slavery is wrong. I am not talking about bondage in the bedroom or even hierarchical relationships but actual slavery. Slave harems are not a harem. It's just slavery. If they cannot say no without fear of repercussions, it is rape. Period. Now master/slave play is wholly different."

Most of the room was red-faced to one degree or another, unused to such a blunt way of speaking about sex or relationships.

"The final week will be group projects. You will be assigned a classmate who is best suited to you. You will explain your situation to each other and compare and contrast. This is not meant to critique but to get an outside perspective on your life without judgment. By the end of that week, you will present a full report to me on what you need to improve to become a better Harem Protagonist.

This is the only course that is required by everyone. After you finish it, it is up to you to take electives to achieve that goal. 'Self-Denial and its consequences' is only a requirement for a few of you. I will then help compile a list of courses that will aid you in that goal. Politics. Combat. Sexual Techniques. We teach anything and everything here for a nascent Harem Protag, but always remember it is up to you to put forth the effort."

Mikael took a moment to look around the room, meeting their eyes as if willing to take this seriously.

"We will not be holding your hand. This course will take serious self-reflection and effort on your part. It all takes work, no matter what your goal is. A childhood sweetheart, the popular kid, a harem, or even a quiet life with no romance. As Harem Protagonists, your lives will be challenging, dangerous, exhausting, and even life-threatening. But, with our help, you will reach your happy ending."

Author's Note:

This one is less of a direct comedy, but I had the idea for the premises, and it sent me into a fit of giggles, so here we are.

This will do it for omakes this week. I am releasing it now since I will be travelling tomorrow.

As mentioned, I will return with the next full chapter on June 2nd. If I have time for short omakes while travelling, I will try and release them, but I can't guarantee I will, so I won't make a promise I can't keep.

I will see you all in a few weeks with the final part of Volume 2: Tribunal.

OMAKE VII: RAPTUROUS SCROLLS

“My Thane, I am sworn to carry your burdens,” Lydia started.

“Hm,” the Dragonborn held their chin in their hands in thought.

The wooden doors loomed ominously in front of them.

“But this time, I must refuse,” the housecarl continued.

“I agree with Lydia,” Serana chimed in.

“It’s not that bad.”

“Slaying Alduin the Worldeater in Sovernguard wasn’t ‘that bad.’” Lydia said sarcastically. “Miraak, the first Dragonborn wasn’t ‘that bad.’ Stopping the civil war wasn’t ‘that bad.’ This is so much worse than all of those. Combined.”

“You’re exaggerating. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“That’s what you said before we went to a random cave and found the Wolf Queen being resurrected.”

“Or when you decided to go vampire hunting and helped start the apocalypse,” Serana sighed.

“I’m glad I did. And it all worked out in the end. So will this. Come on, it will be fun. Where’s your sense of adventure, you two?”

“I remember you said something similar before having a drink with Sam Guevenne,” Serana smirked, getting a glare from the Dragonborn.

“We agreed never to speak of that!”

“And yet, here we are, doing the same thing again,” Lydia sighed, her head falling into her hands. “Only ten times worse.”

“It will be quick. In and out,” the Thane tried to persuade. “Think of the shouts I could learn.”

“Think of the damage!” Lydia pointed skyward.

The Dragonborn very pointedly did not look up at the night sky, even if the new moons were gorgeous. White and Blue orbs of different sizes against the darkness of space.

That one of them was a body was of no consequence.

“Well, I am going in,” they declared, getting glairs from the two women. The Dragonborn remained firm. They weren’t the type to cower in fear.

And if their hands were shaking a bit when they opened the door, nobody said anything.

As soon as the door to Jorrvaskr opened, the trio was almost blasted back by the cacophonous sounds.

(There was a dose of irony there, one the Dragonborn did not notice till much later.)

Laughter filled the hall of the Companions, as did cheers, jeers, and raucous singing.

Now, the Dragonborn was familiar with the Companions. (They better be, they were the Harbinger.) So they recognized some familiar faces.

Ria was singing along to a war ballad played by an attractive Khajit/Argonian/Imperial woman.

Vikas and Farkas were in a drinking competition with a bodacious blonde in a green shirt and a dark-skinned woman.

Skjor was trying (and failing) to seduce a woman with one eye and auburn hair.

Vignar Gray-mane was deep into his cups and had joined three new recruits in an arm wrestling competition. Only they were all competing against the same blue woman simultaneously. And loosing.

Njada was holding her own competition with another new face. The tall, dark-haired woman in gold and red armour was holding her own as the pair competed in a thumb war, of all things.

Athis was part of a cheering crowd that surrounded a pit where Torvar was squaring off, fists raised against another bodacious blond, this one in blue.

Earlund Gray-mane was off to the side, talking with a Mer with long purple hair. Judging by the way they were gesticulating to each other, they were talking shop.

Not too far, also off to the side, Tilma the Haggard was resting her weary head in her hand. Occasionally she would reach for some more coffee, sharing a pitcher with the dark-haired woman who watched the party with a small smile.

It was a loud, rowdy mess. Any time someone finished their drink, a pitcher of ale or mead would float over and pour some more, ensuring nobody ever went without. Food appeared on plates, only for half of it to disappear in an instant as a chubby cat devoured it. Music filled the hall, echoing over the din. Some people danced, but they were a rarity.

If that had been all, the Dragonborn and their companions would not have hesitated to enter. But the problem wasn't the Companions or the party. Even if it was the third day straight that it had been going on.

The problem was that everyone who had entered since it began had not escaped.

A drunk Balgruuf the Greater danced a jig wildly, arm slung over the shoulder of Sanguine, The Daedric Prince of Revelry.

The same dark-haired woman sipping coffee with Tilma was also chatting casually to the floating eyes of Hermaeus Mora.

Hircine was having a staring contest with the fat cat that kept eating all the food, even as said cat sat on the lap of Namira. The Deadric Prince of Hunger seemed

enamoured with stroking its fur.

The shadows in the corner of the building twisted unnaturally as Nocturnal tried to flirt with a deadpan Dunmer.

Azura floated on her back above the crowd, belting out songs off-key and giggling to herself.

And it wasn't just the Daedra that were present.

"You made it!" Mikael stood from where he was laughing with Akatosh and Talos, his arms spread wide in greeting at the three (terrified) arrivals. "I thought the invitation got lost in the mail."

"No-"

"AH!!" Mikael screamed in pain, interrupting the Dragonborn. Blood splattered the floor at their feet as the trio jumped away, hands falling to their weapons.

Nobody else in the building blinked.

"Aela, you crazy bitch!" Mikael cursed as he bent down and yanked the arrow from the back of his leg. "What is with you Nords and knees!?"

"Fuck me!" The redhead archer yelled over the crowd, and another arrow knocked on her bow.

"No!" Mikael denied vehemently, ducking under the arrow. "Scathach? Can you grab the horny dog? I'll be done in a moment."

The new redhead, unfamiliar to the Dragonborn but with hair that reminded them of blood rather than fire, stood from where she had been arguing with Kynareth and Zenithar. Scathach lunged, tackling the horny werewolf into a tumble of limbs that caught Mara and Dibella in their wake.

It was not a coincidence both Aedra were so close to the huntress. Nor that they had been talking to an overwhelmed Eli1sif the Fair, trying to get her to join.

"Sorry about that," Mikael apologized, absently ducking as a chair flew over his head and smashed against the wall. "It's a bit rowdy for introductions, but I'll do the rounds later. First, you three need a drink. We have ale, mead, and Scathach's special brew."

"Special brew?" Lydia couldn't help but ask, morbidly curious.

"Not really intended for mortals, but you can have a sip," Mikael waived down a flying jug and poured a cup. "Any more than that, and you won't remember the next month, so share."

Lydia looked at the smiling man, the mess around her, the Dragonborn, and then the mess again.

She downed the entire cup.

"HA!" A voice shouted nearby. Sheogorath sauntered up to the group, yelling at the

man he had flung over his shoulder. “Martin! You owe me six cheese wheels and a sweet roll!”

“Fine, urp,” the man burped. “Now, put me down! Or you’re going to be wearing that sweet roll instead.”

“You always say the nicest things,” the Lord of Madness said, whipping a fake tear from his eyes. “But I’m not hungry. I’m thirsty! Hastil! Where’s my soup?”

“Here, sir,” a long-suffering voice said as a butler, who hadn’t been there a second ago, passed the Daedric Prince a gallon of the Special Brew.

Serana took a cup for herself and downed it as well.

“Looks like your friends are ready to party,” Mikael grinned at the Dragonborn, pouring a third cup and holding it out to the Dragonborn. “You aren’t going to leave them alone, will you?”

In the flickering light of the flames, the shadows of the revellers dancing on the wall, the cup held a demonic appeal to the hero of Skyrim. Mikael’s smile, at once inviting as it was sinister, widened as the Dragonborn took the cup from his hands.

In the end, the Dragonborn put up a valiant but fruitless fight.

With no allies, no weapons, and wholly unfamiliar with their foes, they were defeated on the fourth day after a long-fought battle.

The Party would go on for a week.

Author's Note:

A story on Tamriel would be interesting, but I don't plan to add more crossovers to the current fic.

My problem with jump chain/waifu-catalogue/world-hopping stories is that, more often than not, the story essentially resets when someone leaves a world. The characters might continue to grow and change, like in RR and a few others, but if they ever return to a world, it is hard for the audience to be reinvested in something when the stakes are so small. After all, nothing is stopping the characters from leaving again, so all sense of urgency or crisis is lost.

If the characters don't care about a world, why should the readers?

Volume 3 will take place in the same world as Volume 2. So I am sticking to omakes for any more crossovers. And this is the first of three omakes is done and out of the way.

For those curious where this all came from, there was a string of requests for omakes on the forums, using the letters of the Alphabet to list the world the readers wanted. It only got to Y before I posted the last chapter (thus, 25 instead of 26).

As a celebration of the one-year anniversary of RR, I decided to answer the challenge using a Random number generator. The next two will be released, one a day, till the 7th.

OMAKE VIII: A RHAPSODY OF THRONES

“Mikael Waters, you stand accused of high treason.”

Daenerys Targaryen sat on the Iron Throne, her retinue surrounding her, as her right-hand woman read the sentencing to this last and most formidable foe.

She was ready for this all to be done. The trials had been going on for weeks as she sought to consolidate her hold on the Seven Kingdoms.

No more war. No more Night King. Just peace and rebuilding.

Rebuilding which would have gone much easier if this man had bent the knee.

But Mikael Waters kneeled to no one.

His pride would be his death.

Impressive resolve for a bastard, but he had more than earned the right to be proud.

As it was, Daenerys had a headache about how she would handle the riots that would form from the little folk when they received word of his execution.

Mikael Waters was a hero to them.

A hero brought low by her.

If it wasn’t for the insistence of her handmaids, Daenerys would have been happy to send him into exile rather than have him killed. But they had never steered her wrong yet, so she had followed their advice.

The man, a pacifist so famous he wasn’t even cuffed, stood unbowed before the most powerful men and women of the Seven Kingdoms.

The new Queen of the Seven Kingdoms had once heard he had been beset by assassins but, rather than fight back, had convinced them to not only spare his life but to slay their original contractor. It was said he refused to even kill a fly and would never physically hurt another living being.

Such an admirable man looked devastated as his charges were read to the assembled crowd of nobles (those who survived) that gathered in the throne room.

It was rather lengthy but basically boiled down to: Rising above your station. Crimes against the crown. And having the bad luck of being on the losing side in a war.

After the more serious crimes were read out, a few charges Daenerys was unaware of were also read.

“For the crime of stealing a horse.”

“It’s not stealing if the owner is dead,” Mikael denied with a frown. “Then it’s just animal rescue.”

“For despoiling a priestess, laying with a lady of high standing, and fathering over a

thousand children with different women."

"Cersei and Melisandre came on to me. Not the other way around," he sighed in resignation, barely putting up a fight. "And nothing happened. I don't cheat on my wives." Admirable in its own way. She hadn't even known the man was married. Or that he was a polygamist. "And that last one is completely made up. And if it weren't, it's not even a crime. This is a sham trial, and you know it. Let's get this over with."

He was right.

This was getting excessive. Daenerys shot a look towards her right-hand woman. It wasn't like Emma to make mistakes like this.

The blonde showed no indication of speeding it up, taking her time to read even more absurd charges. Daenerys looked to her retinue, trying to get their read on the situation. Their political acumen had saved her life before.

Robin had that little smirk on her face. Tsunade wasn't smiling but radiated contentment as opposed to Yoruichi, who was grinning like a jungle cat about to feast. Ranni was expressionless as always, but long familiarity with her told Daenerys that the woman was incredibly smug. Melina was trying to calm Medea, who was laughing quietly in a significant breach of court etiquette.

They all, to a woman, were watching the situation with relish. As if seeing this man brought low was their long-held desire.

"You are also accused of burning several Septs and despoiling artifacts of sacred significance," Emma accused with a smirk.

The gathering nobles and courtiers shuffled as murmurs broke out. That was a serious accusation, especially after the loss of the Great Sept of Baelor.

"It was Winter. We were cold," Mikael sighed again as if this was just another silly accusation. "And if they don't want their artifacts used in latrines, they shouldn't be shaped like that. Or leave them undefended."

The crowd's murmur started to rise to a clamour, forcing Daenerys to step in.

"Enough!" She ordered, standing from the Iron Throne. Emma took a step back but, judging by the smirk on her face, was utterly unrepentant. They would be having words later. "Mikael Waters! Your crimes are numerous. So are the blessings you have given to the people of Our realm. Your creations. Your aide in the Long Night. Your defence of the little folk of Our lands. They speak of your potential. We will ask one last time. Bend the knee. Swear fealty to Us. You shall be spared to continue to work for the betterment of all."

"I will not," Mikael denied. "I only kneel to my wives. And only in bed. I am a free man, no matter what."

“Very well,” Daenerys felt her stomach clench. She had been hoping it wouldn’t come to this. That he would swallow his pride for the sake of his life. If nothing else, in order to see his wives again. “Then, by Our right as Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, We sentence you to death by beheading. Your wealth shall be claimed, and your lands seized. Your family shall be spared in light of your deeds.”

Political theatre. That was all this was.

Mikael Waters had been born a bastard with nothing to his name. He had achieved considerable wealth thanks to his inventions and political titles for services to his various lieges, but he had held on to none of it. It was all reinvested into raising the Seven Kingdoms to new heights.

It was as if he had no material desires. No attachment to wealth, fame, or land.

By any standard, Mikael Waters was a saint.

(Not of the Seven, obviously, but saint-like nonetheless.)

Combine that moral integrity with his intelligence and political acumen, Daenerys dearly wish she could have swayed him to her side.

If she had three Mikael Waters, she could rule the world in her lifetime.

“Do you have any last words?” The Queen signalled for one of her guards to step forward.

“I just want to know how? How did this happen?” Mikael looked around the room, his face a painting of confused despair. “I keep running the numbers in my head, and it doesn’t make sense. How did I lose?”

“Human stupidity.”

Daenerys glared at Emma for her severe breach of conduct but allowed the blonde to continue as she hadn’t known how to answer the man’s question.

“I accounted for that,” Mikael denied.

“No, you didn’t,” Melina countered from beside Daenerys. “Your egotism blinded you. You try and understand others but are unable to truly think like them. Even when you believe you are dumbing your thoughts down to their level, you still overestimate others. Most people are stupid. Monumentally stupid. And you couldn’t get rid of those idiots yourself, thus chaining your feet and dragging you down.”

“I shouldn’t need to,” Mikael denied vehemently. “This isn’t a book or a show! Idiots don’t need to survive to drive the plot along! You know how common it is for stupid rulers or nobles to die? If they are incompetent, their vassals, knights, or any number of servants will kill them. It’s easy. Humans are squishy. A bump on the stairs. A fall from a horse. A fake political charge. Guards not liking their liege. Hell, the praetorian guard practically made it a tradition! To say nothing of Eunuchs of China!”

Daenerys suddenly felt very exposed. Though she wondered about the names he mentioned. Were they foreign?

“Cowardice,” Ranni answered, even as the crowd quieted to nothing, watching the drama unfold. “Even should they have the ability, they lack the will. Few would risk their lives to be free when given the choice to submit to fate for safety.”

“But it’s common sense!” Mikael looked honestly befuddled at the idea. “If a king is going to get you killed, then you should kill him first. Even if you die, you take the bastard with you.”

“Fear and stupidity,” Tsunade shrugged. “You were going to lose from the get-go. You had the manpower and infrastructure and played to your strengths, but you were too weighed down by idiots. We started with nothing, but we only had one to worry about. And there were multiple of us, so we could have one watch her for anything stupid while the rest were productive.”

Daenerys suddenly felt very insulted.

And worried.

What was going on?

“In the Game of Thrones, you win, or you die. And you, Mikael Waters, have lost.” Emma smirked, and Mikael sagged in defeat. “Accept it.”

“Fine, fine, this is my loss. So long as none of you cheated.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth did the shadows of the throne room lengthen and stretch. The fires of the torches still burned, but their light did little to pierce the obsidian darkness that flowed over the walls and floor.

The Queenguard rushed to surround Daenerys, weapons drawn, even as the courtiers started to panic. Some tried to flee, but the black shadows had covered the doors and windows.

The newly crowned Queen noted, even a fear filled her, that neither Mikael nor her handmaids reacted.

From that black pitch, a woman arose as if water bubbling from a spring.

“Nobody used anything more than basic human abilities,” the gray-skinned woman said in a monotone. “Mikael did not kill anyone. Scathach, Artoria, and Diana did not help them. Everyone followed the rules. You lost.”

“Fine,” Mikael bit out another sigh. “Give it here then.”

Even as Daenerys watched her handmaids cheer, clap, and high-five each other, one more shadow bubbled from the floor at Mikael’s feet.

A white cone rose from the floor, clearly visible against the black, and the bastard reached down to grab it.

Mikael placed it firmly on his head, DUNCE spelled large across its length for all to see.

“I lose, but I am editing the prize a bit.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” Medea decried.

“The prizes remain the same,” Mikael rolled his eyes. “I am just changing the order you get them in. I don’t want to have to deal with all of you pregnant at the same time, and you don’t either,” Daenerys’ handmaids reluctantly nodded as Mikael continued. The mother of dragons felt like she was in a nightmare. “So it’s only going to be two at a time. I will let you all decide the order.”

Suddenly, all her handmaids froze amidst their celebration. Then, slowly they shifted their attention to each other, eyes narrowed in calculation.

Mikael crossed his arms, DUNCE cap proudly on his head as he smirked triumphantly.

Even when he lost, he still won.

Daenerys suddenly felt the urge to cry but could not even lean back on her throne to relax.

Even when she won, she still lost.

Author's Note:

Some omakes are filled with jokes, something for everyone, but others have to stand on their premise alone to be entertaining.

Westeros isn't a fun place, so I had to think outside the box this time. I had this idea for a political thriller, Mikael Vs his family, where he loses not because he is worse but because his aids are incompetent (a la Death Note). It is hard to get that across with just a short Omake, but I think it came out all right.

To be honest, I have never seen the show. I just read the books, and that was years ago. I hated everyone in it, but I could appreciate George R. R. Martin's political writing, even if it was sometimes very contrived.

See you tomorrow for the next one.

OMAKE IX: DRAGON OF DRAGONS

Rias Gremory had a rough few days.

Just a little while ago, she had been going through the relationship drama typical to people her age, interspersed with devil and harem politics.

Then the man she was in love with died.

The young heiress had been inconsolable with grief, held up in her room mourning the loss of the young, perverted, honest, perverted, loyal, perverted, determined and perverted man she had fallen in love with.

Not even the giant monsters attacking the Underworld, a product of the Longinus Annihilation Maker going rampant to such a degree that not even the Peerage of the Satans could easily deal with the thirteen summoned monsters, varying in size between 100 and 200 meters tall.

To be fair to Rias, though, it wasn't as if one extra high-class devil would be much help against things that were throwing down with dozens of ultimate classes.

Then, when she finally found the strength to get up and fight, her lost love appeared, ridding Great Red of all things. Said dragon the size of a mountain range then infused Issei with its power, turning his regular Dragon Mail into a giant mech to fight the monsters.

(Rias' inner weeb was squeeing in joy. She would get Issei to do this again, even if she had to let him grope her breasts for days to power up.)

So yes, Rias Gremory's last few days had been a series of ups and downs.

This was why, when everything seemed to be looking up, the hero having come to the Underworld's rescue, a resigned weariness filled her, instead of surprise, when the next cataclysm arrived.

"BAKA-RED!!"

The voice was so loud that the entire Underworld shook with the shout force.

For a second, Rias thought it was Ophis, perhaps reclaiming some of her power and starting her vendetta against her foe once more.

But the voice was clearly male, and the Ouroboros Dragon was currently in the form of a little girl riding on Mech-Issei's shoulder.

"**Ah, shit**," Great Red cursed, speaking aloud for the first time in recorded history. His voice was quieter than the shout but still loud enough to echo all the way to Rias' position. "**Hey, brat, can you speed this up? I gotta go.**"

A part of Rias' mind thought he sounded nervous, but that was impossible.

Great Red was the Dragon of Dragons.

For him to be afraid would be absurd.

"YOU SHITTY SALAMANDER! YOU MORAL COWARD!"

"Fuck."

Rias felt her understanding of reality buckle under what her eyes were telling her was happening. The portal Great Red used to arrive in the Underworld from Dimensional Gap had started to expand.

Quickly.

In less than a second, it had expanded to cover the entire sky, but instead of seeing the riotous colours that generally filled the void between dimensions, all Rias could see was White.

The entire sky of the Underworld was a pale shade of White.

Then the White *moved*.

"**You can't get away with me. Take your losses like a man, you overgrown gecko!**" *IT* spoke. Its head was still on the other side of the portal, for which Rias was grateful.

One fang alone was the size of Great Red.

(Rias heard someone laughing.)

"**I didn't lose!**" Great Red roared up at *IT*. "**The judges were biased!**"

"You lost!" The head of the white dragon insisted. **"You must be Dreaming if you think your barrel roll double front flip was cooler than my Flight of Cosmic Dragons! Pay up, you big baby!"**

"**Gah,**" Great Red staggered back in the air as if the idea physically pained him. "**Can you take a rain check?**" Rias didn't know the most powerful being in the universe could sound sheepish. "**Can't you see I'm busy?**"

"No. Issei can handle it. Or I am tripling his homework. So pay up now!"

[You know me, White Dragon-sama?] Issei's giant red mech said with some effort.

It should be noted that while the two dragons of apocalyptic size were arguing, the Bandersnatch continued their rampage through the Underworld even as the devils tried to stop them. Issei had to dodge beams, blows and other weird attacks from the Jabberwocky, all while trying to keep it from the nearby civilians.

"Oi! I am your favourite teacher, you perverted brat! Who was the one who got you into Practical Sex Ed with Medb?"

[Mikael-Sensei!?] (Somewhere nearby, Azazel and Rossweiss felt an invisible arrow to their heart.) [You're real? And a dragon too?]

(Whoever was laughing was getting louder.)

"Of course I'm real. Just for that, I am rejecting your application for Master

Level Lewds with Kiara!"

[Gah! No! Anything but that! I am so close to my degree in Tantric Sciences! Please! I'll do anything!]

(Issei's harem suddenly felt a mix of white-hot rage at the dragon and the urge to name their firstborn after him. On the one hand, he had clearly been the one who helped Issei lose his virginity, meaning none of them could claim it, but on the other, he was responsible for why the young devil was so incredible in bed. They settled for asking Issei about the details later.)

"**Then hold Baka-Red down so he can't escape!**" 'Mikael-sensei' ordered. Issei hesitated, looking from the Jabberwocky to the city behind him. "**I'll deal with it. You just grab him.**"

[**Yes, Sir!**] Giant Scale-mail saluted before lunging at Great Red.

"Oi! You brat! Are you really going to do me dirty like this? After everything I did for you?"

[I am very sorry Great Red.] Issei replied, even as he grabbed the massive dragon's wings. To his credit, he did sound regretful even as he hung on for dear life. [Thank you for bringing me back to life. I will never forget it. But my life is not worth the Devil's Bodhisattva's Oppai. Those who pass her class can go forever! They can control their fertility! One touch from them will allow any woman to grow magnificent Oppai! For that future, I cannot allow you to escape. For the Oppai!]

(Rias realized she was the one laughing. Weird. Why was Grayfia giving her those odd looks.)

While Issei had been delivering his impassioned (and perverted) speech, the Jabberwocky had tried to advance on the devil city.

Tried.

From the white sky, a black rain fell. Like liquid shadow, if slithered down from the heavens in drops. Each cut a chunk from the monster's flesh as a torrent of black. In a few seconds, a pool had formed at the Jabberwocky's feet.

From that pool of black ink, a geyser of black power erupted, covering the 200-meter-tall monstrosity in a film of black.

Feminine and malevolent laughter resounded around, drowning out Rias' mad giggles, as two sets of red eyes appeared in the black ink as the Jabberwocky was dragged into its tenebrous depths.

[Uh? Sensei?] Issei asked, sitting on Great Red's wing. The dragon tried to subtly slide away while the young man was distracted, but a shadowy tendril wrapped around his paw and held him fast.

“Don’t worry about it. That’s just Raven. I’ve told you about her before, remember? My Demon Lord Wife?”

[You did?]

“My big tiddy goth GF.”

[Oh, her! Please to meet you, ma’am! I am a new devil. Please take care of me.]

More malevolent laughter filled the air.

(It should be noted that devils took the title ‘Demon Lord’ seriously. In the following years, much debate was given about whether Raven qualified as one by their standards despite not being a devil. In the end, after more than a decade of debate, devils being notoriously meticulous on such subjects, it was decided to give her the honorary title of ‘Mammon.’

Mikael would laugh himself silly with all the ‘mammon-ary’ puns he would make.]

“**There are a few more,**” the dragon said to itself as its eye, larger than a city, roved around the Underworld. “**Any of you want to take them? Also, Glynda, do you mind cleaning up a bit? It’s a bit of a mess down there.**”

Rias wondered who he was talking to for a second, then pinpricks of light fell from the open portal.

It was only thanks to a devil’s enhanced senses and the use of a spell that Rias could tell that it was actually a group of women flying in the direction of the remaining Bandersnachs.

[Sensei! This is your Harem? I’m so jealous! They have magnificent Oppai! I’ll follow you into hell!!] Rias was ashamed that she could tell from just his tone of voice that Issei must be crying in envy.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, brat. We’re already in hell, anyway,” the White dragon responded absentmindedly before continuing his conversation. **“I know it’s annoying, but you are just so good at it. Come on, once we’re done here, I’ll do that thing you like. No holding back or anything. Just you, me, your crop, the dungeon, and fifty hours of uninterrupted fun.”**

Rias was glad she had been watching attentively as, had she blinked, she would have missed the much smaller, only about the size of Tanin, purple dragon fall from the portal. It flew over the Underworld, and as it passed, all the damage caused by the Khaos Brigade was undone in its wake.

[So jealous! Just wait! One day, Buchou and I will do it for an entire week! You’ll see!] Issei repeated, dramatically shaking his massive fist at the sky.

Rias wanted to find a hole to crawl into as hundreds of eyes turned to look at her.

Mech-Issei was still cool, though.

"**Now there is no distraction, Baka-Red,**" 'Mikael-sensei' turned back to the trapped Dragon of Dream, completely ignoring Issei's dramatic declaration. "**Pay up!**"

Bound by the powers of Demon Lord and left with no escape, the Apocalypse Dragon was forced to concede the spoils to the victor.

"**…"** Even with Great Red's massive size and being so close, Rias could not hear the words the dragon mumbled.

"I am sorry, I didn't quite get that?" The massive white dragon in the sky tilted its head as if pressing his ear against a door.

"…ragons."

"Still too quiet. You need to speak loud and clear. So everyone can hear you."

"Fine! Damnit, you petty bastard! White Dragons are better than Red Dragons. Are you happy now?"

"Very happy," Mikael answered, smug satisfaction radiating from his bellowing voice. **"That wasn't so hard, now was it?"**

{NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!}

Ddraig's cry of lament echoed across the land from Issei's armour.

{YYYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSSSSSS!!!!!}

But it was drowned out by Albion's triumphant cheer as Team Vali joined them in their defence against the Hero Faction.

Battered by the rise and falls, the twists and turns, the despair and hope that had come and gone in the last few days, Rias only felt her vision dim as her lack of sleep, as well as the relief of seeing the man she loved alive and well, finally catch up to her.

The young heiress' last waking thought, before she was caught in Akeno's arms and fell into a slumber, was just as coherent as the last ten minutes had been for the Underworld.

Surprisingly, Vali could dance a perfect jig.

Author's Note:

I had a lot of fun with this one, giggling the entire time. Issei is just such a fun character to write. The whole DXD world is. I don't know why its characters get such hate when it is, essentially, a crack/fanservice/fanfic by itself. Some things might be wrong, as it has been years since I read those light novels (never seen the anime, so I don't know if things are different there.)

One year ago today, June 7th, 2022, I posted the first chapter of RR on Questionable Questing. Here we are, 365 days later, at roughly 406K words.

That is, on average, 1110 words a day.

Holy crap. I thought this would be a relatively quick story, around the 300k mark, but here we are.

I wonder what it will be at when it ends.

A full chapter will still be released this Friday, so I will see you in a few days.

Volume 3

Consequences

CONSEQUENCES I

"In nature, there are neither rewards nor punishments; there are consequences."
-Robert Green Ingersoll

Actions and consequences.

The push and pull of people, the world, and reality itself.

Nothing happens in a vacuum. Everything creates ripples.

Not even in the darkest reaches of space can one escape from the waves caused by existence.

Even if all you do is take up space, your very being leads to consequences. Good or bad, we all affect the world around us.

We cannot escape this.

We do not want to escape this.

There would be no greater hell imaginable than to exist and not be able to affect anything.

In the wake of Heartbreak, consequences rippled and clashed like waves in a pond.

The world was trying to piece itself together, aided by the healing of the Elden Lord, rescue efforts by heroes, and the shared unity that came from surviving the worst day in human history.

Not all consequences were good.

Wars, civil and otherwise, flared to life over the planet in the cooling ashes of the Endbringers' attacks. Supers rose to power as warlords, nations crumbled as political and physical infrastructure crumbled below the precise attacks calculated to do the most damage.

It could have been much worse.

Mikael and his Family couldn't be predicted by any form of clairvoyance. Their known abilities and personality traits could be modelled to give a likelihood of actions they would take, but all it would produce was a failed model.

Tohu had done so and acted on the model, assuming the Family would employ all resources they were known to possess. The large healing area Melina had displayed. Glynda's telekinetic repair of destroyed cities. Raven's assumed power after consuming her father. Mikael's attitude of using crises as opportunities.

Tohu modelled a world, a worst-case scenario, of their interference and built its plans off that simulated future.

Triggers were planted, dominoes stacked, and the world started to tumble into a state where the Primary Objective would be achieved within the year. Well ahead of schedule, thanks to the existence of the Elden Lord.

Nobody could predict Emma and her Semblance. Mikael was the only person to know about it, except for her.

Nobody could have predicted Heartbreak.

In the wake of the barrage of Mad Love, dominoes planted had fallen sideways. Triggers went off too early or too late to have maximum impact. Wars that should have raged for years ended in days from a lucky bullet or mistimed speech.

People, supposed to lash out in fear and pain at their losses, chose to embrace their fellows to once again feel a fraction of that overwhelming Love.

Others, meant to remain together to provide aid at opportune moments, separated due to the lack of such Love.

Mikael might hate Master abilities and rather die than put himself under their influence, but anything can do good in the right circumstances.

The world had lost its gods, many of its protectors, and its stability, but it was still there.

Battered, broken, and beaten, Earth carried on.

It still survived to grow into a new world.

Though Götterdämmerung might have succeeded, Ragnarok was delayed.

For a little while.

******

Taylor Hebert picked her way through the slagged streets of what was once Brockton Bay.

People were cautiously wandering the roads under the supervision of emergency responders after being cautioned about the risks and told to steer clear of any buildings with warning signs on them.

The roads of this section had been tested to still be intact for a given definition of the word. Many streets had boiled under Behemoth's heat aura, even if the monster had passed by blocks away. So many twisted lumps of metal that used to be cars littered the road, their frames melted into grotesque depictions reminiscent of modern art.

The main trail of the battle had happened well away. Taylor had seen the crushed and smashed houses, the craters and aftereffects of esoteric power usage.

This part of the city was better off. Some buildings were still identifiable, though the

fires consumed most of them.

As she passed the half-burned building, Taylor idly realized that that was the Andersons' duplex. They had a kid, only fourteen, who went to Immaculata and had managed to keep his head down enough to avoid running afoul of trouble.

Then again, even the school filled with nazis was better than Winslow.

That meant the building beside it was Cat Candice's place. Candice was nice enough for a seventy-four-year-old spinster, but she had four different cats. They would sometimes keep the neighbourhood up with their yowling.

Taylor hoped the cats made it out okay.

As she walked by the ruins of buildings, Taylor tried to remember everything she could about the people who lived there. She wasn't the neighbourly type, but Emma had gone out of her way to be social when they moved into the area.

That was the Millers' place, Carl Smith's apartment, the building that had been available for rent for a month. Taylor was sure a few bums had been living there. Then this was the corner store.

Taylor paused as she looked at the shattered glass windows, the bent and blackened doorframe and the toppled shelves.

She didn't want to turn the corner.

She didn't want to see what had become of her home.

She did anyway.

It was…

It was surprisingly intact.

Oh, the buildings between her house and where Taylor stood were utterly destroyed by the fires, the blasts, and the heat. One looked to have been melted by some sort of acid.

But her house?

From what she could see, it still had four walls and a roof, which was unique on this street. Sure, they were darkened by soot and blackened with fire damage, but the building looked whole.

It didn't even look like the windows had broken.

Taylor had to hop a bit to enter the house, as the stairs had been shattered, but she found surprisingly little damage when she entered. The power was out, of course, but she had her phone flashlight and an open door. The kitchen was a mess, every delicate piece of glass had shattered, but the living room looked untouched.

Taylor frowned as she walked around the house, noting what was broken and still salvageable.

A lot more than she expected was intact. Most of the second floor was a wash, the

guest room was ruined by a ruptured pipe in the wall from the nearby bathroom, and everything in the storage space had fallen. But a large section of their bedroom was still okay.

Hell, their bed looked pristine, sheets still folded.

Taylor's frown deepened.

This… didn't make sense.

While she was happy that not everything was ruined, she didn't like unanswered questions. Questions like how had a piece of a nearby house crashed into her bedroom window hard enough to be embedded in the wall yet not shatter the glass.

Looking around her room, she didn't see anything out of place, which was suspicious after an Endbringer attack.

With narrowed eyes, Taylor looked through their stuff but found nothing had been stolen from their mini-safe.

The only other thing of value in the house was…

Taylor raced down the stairs, worry gripping her.

She found the jewel, the gift from the Elden Lord, exactly where they had left it as they grabbed their bug-out bags and evacuated.

The insect glittered in the sun's light passing through the living room window, sitting completely undisturbed on the mantle in the living room. It didn't even look dusty despite the house having been empty for days.

In fact…

Taylor tracked her eyes around the living room, noting the intact TV and undamaged furniture. As her eyes passed over the entryway to the kitchen, she saw proof of what she suspected.

The shattered plates and glasses had covered the floor in dangerous shards, but for some reason, none of them had passed through the open doorway into the living room. Instead, they fell in such a way that they created a circular barrier bowing away from the entrance.

Taylor rubbed her eyes tiredly.

Fucking Supers.

Now that she was looking for the abnormality, she noticed how there was a circular section around the jewel that was pristine, roughly lining up with her living room and the bedroom above.

Beyond that circle, things were roughed up but relatively intact. It got progressively worse the further from the jewel, the burst pipe in the wall at the absolute furthest you could get without leaving the house.

While Taylor was happy that her living room and the bedroom above were spared from destruction, she wasn't sure how she felt that there was clearly some Super bullshit going on with the jewelled scarab.

Taylor was grudgingly grateful she hadn't sold it as planned and instead listened to Emma's insistence to keep it.

It did look nice.

That and Taylor genuinely feared what would happen if the Elden Lord ever found out they had sold his gift.

A welcoming embrace, warm and comforting, wrapped around her. Powerful, yet gentle. Dangerous, yet protective. Whispers in her ear that she was safe, that there was nothing to fear. That she was Loved.

Taylor shuddered at the phantom sensation and the painful yearning in her chest.

Her stupid mutation, supposedly the ability to protect her mind from all psychic powers, hadn't been able to protect her from the Heartbreak. It was like it wasn't even targeting her mind, bypassing her defence to reach her soul.

She needed to get out.

Get out of the remains of her home, away from the Super Jewel or whatever.

Away from the reminder.

A few minutes later, Taylor found herself walking the ruined streets. Just another face in the crowd.

Some moved with purpose, searching charred and broken buildings for anything salvageable. Most found little that remained. Not everyone was lucky enough to have a magic artifact protect their homes.

Others, like Taylor, meandered their way around a city at once familiar and foreign, as if in a daze. They steered clear of the sections blocked off by signs and tape, risky areas with questionable structural integrity. Milling about in small groups, halting words were exchanged between people.

It was like the city was dreaming, a haze of shock, pain, fear, and loss casting a blanket of numb shock over their thoughts.

Nothing felt real in this ruined world.

Captain Atom had already absorbed all the radiation left in Behemoth's wake, a duty he was familiar with as he wasn't permitted to fight the beast itself for fear of what it would do to him. The fires had also been put out by various heroes, so the city was deemed safe enough for people to start returning to search for their things.

Taylor looked over the ruins of her city, now 'safe', and people who would have to try and rebuild their lives.

Some cried.

Some shouted.

One man held the burnt ends of a chair leg, smashing it repeatedly into the blackened road in a rage, sending splinters flying.

Most simply stood in the remains of what was once their entire world.

Childhood homes.

Businesses they counted on to survive.

It was a small section of a city, one like thousands of others, and yet it mattered to them. Every inch of pavement, stone, metal, and wood held a cherished or important memory to someone.

They were the lucky ones.

Despite the high hero mortality, not a single civilian had died in Behemoth's rampage. Compared to other cities, they were blessed.

Yet Taylor was tired.

So goddamn tired.

Tired of living in fear of the next Endbringer attack.

Tired of never knowing if Emma was late for dinner because of traffic or a new villain.

Tired of living in a world designed for the strong, where the weak were just casualty numbers. They were just faceless backdrops to the bombastic fights of Supers that could destroy their cities on a whim.

She was tired of living in a world without meaning, and everything was transient except for the ever-present fear and loss.

Tired of never having safety.

She was drowning in Him. Floating in a never-ending expanse of calm waters, where nothing could ever hurt her. She was safe. She was Home.

"Taylor Hebert?" A male voice calling her name shook her from her thoughts.

Looking around, it took her a long moment to identify the familiar features of the man.

"Mr. Gladly?" Taylor asked in surprise.

It had been years since she had seen her old teacher. Her memories of the man weren't good or bad. He was just one of many teachers at Winslow. The school had been a shit hole, but it was one she and Emma had survived together. A period of their lives that they had to get through to achieve their goals and get to college or pursue their chosen careers.

He looked rough.

His jeans and faded shirt were covered in ash, dust, and grime. His hair and forehead

were matted with sweat, and he held a thick trash bag over his shoulder, filled to bursting.

The entire situation was surreal, like a dream that followed a stream of consciousness. Taylor hadn't given the man a thought since she graduated, as he had never significantly affected her life.

To see him out here, cleaning up or gathering items from his home, was jarring. Like he stopped being the nice yet terrible teacher and became a human instead.

"It is you," he said with a strained smile as he set his filled bag down. "Do you live in this area?"

"I did," Taylor answered uncomfortably, looking around and realizing her feet had taken her along familiar streets. "A few blocks down."

"Sorry," Gladly said with a wince. "How's it looking on your end? My place was wrecked, so I'm staying with my girlfriend. This was all I could get out." He lightly nudged his bulging trash bag with his foot. Items tinkled and clanked inside.

"Not too bad, all things considered," Taylor answered honestly, shuffling awkwardly. Gladly had always been a popular man with the more social students like Emma. The type referred to as Mr. G and would be friendly instead of harsh. "Can't grab everything right now. Going to need a car once the road's fixed."

Even with Emma's aid, Taylor had never become the outgoing type, content with her books. Trying to speak to him now, not as a teacher and student but as fellow adults, was weird.

God, they were probably only ten or so years apart in age. In school, that was a lifetime. Now? Not so much, especially after everything.

"That's good," Gladly smile widened slightly as if genuinely happy for her. "You have a place to stay?"

"We're in the village," she answered with a shrug.

"How is it there?"

"Not too bad," Taylor repeated. "Plenty of food, even its fruit. Clean water, a roof over our heads. There's no electricity, but other than that, I can't complain."

The wooden village had sprung up in only a day. Hundreds of wooden houses, grown out of the ground by one of the Consorts, Tsunade, with the Elden Lord's help.

Each building grew its own food and had beds and hammocks made of leaves and vines. They all looked the same, with the same wooden doors and window panels. There also was no running water for bathrooms, but that was solved by the lake and waterfall the blonde had made, even if it didn't give the privacy many wanted.

But it was enough, especially in the wake of an Endbringer attack.

Brockton Bay was only one of dozens of cities affected and nowhere near the worst.

As shitty as she felt, Taylor could at least thank her lucky stars that this wasn't Beijing.

"You're still with Emma? That's good. I was always rooting for you two."

"Thanks."

God, this was awkward. Was he genuinely this social and interested in her life, or was this chat simply a way for the teacher to avoid thinking about their situation. She couldn't blame him. Taylor knew she couldn't stand sitting around doing nothing.

Emma would be pissed she left on her own, but Taylor was going to go mad laying in her hammock and doing nothing.

"Days like this, you need to hold onto those close to you. I, ugh, I heard about your dad," Mr. Gladly said with a commiserating look. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"'s fine," Taylor said softly, the familiar stab of old pain not as debilitating as it once was.

"I know-"

Gladly froze mid-sentence, mouth shutting, and he looked to the sky. Everyone else on the street did the same, and Taylor froze, panic starting to rise at the unexplained movements.

Another attack? So soon after Behemoth? Was it a villain, or god forbid, another Endbringer?

Was Taylor witnessing the aftereffects of one of Tohu's implanted triggers? The tri-headed Endbringer hadn't appeared over Brockton, she had thought.

Taylor shouldn't have worried, though her panic intensified as a shadow covered the morning sun.

Looking up, she saw glittering light reflected off of purple scales.

The debris and wreckage around her started to levitate and move without being touched. The road, pot marked and melted, began to smooth over.

Some people started to cheer, others shouted words lost over the noise. One man shook his fist at the sky, face flush with rage. Another openly wept, staring at the purple dragon with longing.

Glynda Goodwitch, the dragon, ignored them all as she continued with her work.

"I guess she's done with China," Glady said, voice barely audible over the din of the other people in the street as they watched the dragon manipulate city blocks worth of material.

Anything that could be mended was. Pieces of wood and metal snapped back together as they were manipulated on an almost molecular level.

Anything burned to a significant degree, however, was removed and pilled up in

empty lots. Entire houses were dismantled before their eyes, materials stacked as neatly as possible given the circumstances for future use.

Taylor was trying to understand how everyone had known Glynda Goodwitch would be flying over them before she did.

Her answer was the green-skinned alien floating beside the dragon woman. Martian Manhunter might not have been Taylor's favourite hero, but she was aware of all known psychics. It was necessary, as her mutation prevented even beneficial communication in case of emergencies.

Taylor might not have been evacuated in time if Emma hadn't been with her and received Professor X's call to gather at an extraction point.

"Huh," Gladly grunted in surprise, holding up a lump of twisted metal from his bag. Under the dragon's telekinetic power, it bent back into shape.

An old soccer trophy, no longer soot-stained, glittered in the sunlight.

He looked back at the purple dragon, and they watched it work for a minute before it flew off. All heroes were busy, but the League and the Family were particularly occupied as they weren't restrained by borders or jurisdiction controls.

Taylor idly wondered when she had started to think of the Elden Lord and his Consorts as the Family when Gladly's voice tore her from her thoughts for the second time in five minutes.

"What did you feel?" He asked, voice sombre and low. Taylor wondered what he was talking about for a moment before he continued. "At Heartbreak. What did you feel?"

Safety. Warmth. Love. Home.

She didn't answer.

"I felt unrestrained," Gladly answered instead, voice wistful. "Like I could do anything. All my dreams were possible. Like, with His support, no barrier or rule would ever stop me."

Taylor held her silence.

"My girlfriend says she felt like she was flying," he continued. "Like the Elden Lord was carrying her on His back, taking her to the stars. My brother says he felt like a hero. Like Superman. Invincible."

"Are you angry?" Taylor finally spoke. "At the Elden Lord?"

Some people, a lot of them actually, were angry at the Elden Lord and the Family. In their pain and anger, they lashed out against the dragons, calling for their exodus from Earth or for the heroes to put them away in prison.

They saw Heartbreak as a betrayal and Mastering of the worst sorts. It didn't matter that it had lasted less than a minute. What mattered was their minds were messed with.

Taylor knew it wasn't their minds that had been affected. It was something deeper.

Nor did those people enjoy any sort of popular support.

Even if you ignored that the Elden Lord and his Family had fought and killed the Endbringers when they could have left at any time, they had also killed the Stranger Endbringer, Sebettu, that kept the others alive. After that, the Elden Lord had healed literally everyone on Earth, and now they worked to help rebuild.

Trying to shout over the cheers for the dragons was like an ant trying to stop a flood.

"I'm not," Gladly shook his head. "I know why He did it. A few seconds of feeling like the top of the world is better than letting the Endbringers rampage. Still…"

"Still," Taylor nodded in agreement with the unspoken words.

She handled it better than many others and still felt that soul-deep longing. Emma would sometimes lapse into silence in the middle of a sentence, staring eastward toward where they knew the Elden Lord's Island still resided.

"So much is happening so fast," Gladly sighed. "Endbringers, new and old attacking at once. Demon Lords, aliens, dragons, resurrections, Heartbreak… I feel like I wrap my head around one thing, and two more spring up. Whenever I feel like we get a bit of hope, it gets torn away by some new tragedy. Half the world is mad. Beijing is gone in all but name. And yet, my mother can walk again. My dad's cancer is gone. But I don't have a job and don't know what to do with myself. I have no power to do anything about the situation either. These ups and downs… I can't really take it, you know?"

"I do," Taylor agreed, feeling more empathy for the older man than she ever thought possible.

It was all so tiring and depressing. You knew for every rise, there would be an accompanying fall.

"I watched his interview, you know," Gladly said lightly as he picked up his bag of stuff again. "The one where he talked about how he started out. The kind of stuff he went through." Taylor nodded again. Despite her desire to remain far from the Super scene, she had made an exception for things regarding the Elden Lord because of their still unknown connection. "A man who goes through all that, who feels the way he does for his family, and still helps people? Who has remained true to himself after all this time? I can see why people would worship a man like that."

His piece said the former teacher held out his hand to Taylor.

"It was nice seeing you again, Ms. Hebert. Sorry for unloading on you. Take care of yourself."

Taylor bit back the sarcastic remark that nearly left her lips as she shook his hand and watched her old teacher walk away.

Just because she wasn't religious didn't mean she should denigrate other people's beliefs.

From a purely intellectual perspective, she, too, could understand the appeal. The Elden Lord had been on Earth for only a few months and had already performed many deeds that could be considered miracles. Killing the Endbringers, completely purifying the oceans, saving dozens of heroes from a rampaging alien that not even Superman could beat, thwarting a demon lord's invasion, healing everyone on the planet, and bringing back the dead.

Religions had been formed on much less than that.

But Taylor didn't understand why people seemed so gun-ho on acting like the Elden Lord was unique in this regard. It was so weird to her that so many were pinning their hopes on the new guy when they already had so many proven heroes.

Other heroes might not be as powerful or flashy as the dragons. They might not be as sensational or miraculous, but they, too, were heroes.

Taylor Hebert might not like Supers as a general rule, but she respected them. Respected the 'lowly' Protectorate and the Justice League. Appreciated the dedication, commitment, and sacrifice to be heroes. The part of her that used to wear Armsmaster panties and dreamed about being a hero would always respect those everyday, street-level heroes.

Taylor appreciated the Elden Lord.

She was thankful for everything he and his Family had done, but she wasn't going to start praying to the new flavour of the week, like some sort of living god, when he had only been around for a few months.

If he, and the world, was still around in a few decades, she might think about it.

******

Faceless, shadowy figures tore into him.

Blades, spells, monsters, and gods all threw themselves upon Mikael's back, their weight pressing him further and further down.

He struggled, knees bending and body shaking, trying to persevere as the weight of worlds crushed him.

Other figures, female and familiar, tried to tear through the pile. They propped him up with their own backs, bearing what little pressure they could as much as possible to give aid. Any aid.

It wasn't enough.

The mountain buckled.

The weight of Godrick, Radahn, the Erdtree, the Elden Ring, Behemoth, Leviathan, the gods of this world, and the expectations upon him was too much.

Mikael fell, and his Family fell with him.

She idly wondered if this would be enough.

If this would be the time he didn't come back. If he, like so many other tarnished, would be forsaken by Grace as they lost the will to carry on.

Even now, buried under everything, he was still reaching out for her, arm extended from beneath a pile of corpses.

Begging her not to go. Begging her not to leave him alone. Begging her for help.

She stood, watching it all without lifting a finger in aid.

She never could.

She never did.

And the flames consumed her.

******

Melina awoke with a gasp that she desperately tried to quiet.

It was not to be.

"What's wrong?" Mikael rumbled, pulling her tighter into his embrace.

She didn't know if he had always been this way or if it was a product of surviving by himself for so long, but the slightest noise could wake him from sleep instantly, with no drowsiness.

On days like this, it annoyed her tremendously.

"Nothing," she murmured softly. "Go back to sleep."

"You know that isn't how this works," he chuckled, the rumbling in his chest transmitting to her with the familiar laughter. "I'm up now, so you can either tell me what's wrong, or I will have to get… creative with my interrogation technique."

The way his large hand fluttered gently over her abdomen left little in the way of doubt on how he would go about 'extracting' the information.

Despite herself, Melina felt a slight smile tug at her lips. Mikael would never change.

No, she thought as the smile fell. He would. He had been forced to. It was she that never changed.

"You know," he said conversationally. "When a man tries to cheer up a woman with some early morning sex, he doesn't really want to hear a sigh like that. It's enough to give a man a complex."

"It's not you." Melina knew his ego wasn't so fragile that he was truly affected, but

she did want to clear up any miss communication. “It’s me.”

“Also not something a man wants to hear,” he retorted dryly but relented with a sigh of his own. “You had a nightmare again, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Melina admitted, hating herself for the weakness in her voice.

“The same as the other ones?”

“No.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

How was she supposed to tell him that she felt utterly useless? That since the fight with the Endbringers, she had been once more confronted with the truth about her helplessness in this purposeless existence of hers?

All she could do was cast spells that healed the most superficial of wounds while others did the same job, only better. While he and the rest of their Family fought, and possibly died, against creatures and being so far above her in power that all her training and struggles would be meaningless.

How was she supposed to tell him that the woman he tried to rely on was utterly useless?

“Hmm,” Mikael hummed, pulling her even tighter into his arms. “You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

“What?” Melina asked, befuddled.

“This dream isn’t some sort of prophecy of doom you are keeping to yourself and will set out on an epic quest all on your own to prove your worthiness, is it?”

“Sometimes I wonder what goes on in your mind,” Melina answered seriously, not letting on how close it had come to the truth. She had no plans to do something drastic, but the desire to do… *something* was there.

But she would do nothing, as always.

“Sex, violence and rock and roll, mostly,” Mikael said without missing a beat. “And puns. So many puns. Sometimes I spend hours flying, not contemplating the beauty of the world around me but simply making ocean puns. Or cloud puns. Sometimes sun puns, but those aren’t my brightest work, so you don’t hear them often.”

Melina groaned, wishing she was facing him to give him a good smack upside the head.

“But seriously,” he continued after his chuckles stopped. “I won’t press you if you don’t want to talk about it, I’m definitely not one to talk about keeping secrets, but if it’s bothering you enough to have nightmares, you should talk about it. If not to me, then one of the others. I know you haven’t had a chance to talk with Emma, but I’ve been told that

she is pretty good with this type of thing. Despite her own issues, she helped the rest when they learned about their worlds."

Melina honestly didn't know how she felt about the mutant. She hadn't had time to get to know the platinum blonde since Emma was off the Island as much as Artoria or Diana. What few conversations they had were tinged with wariness and envy.

Emma had made no secret that she was jealous of Melina's time with Mikael, even if the mutant hadn't let it negatively affect their cordial relationship. She was hardly the only one to feel that, so Melina didn't blame her.

It didn't help that Melina was jealous of everyone else.

All she could do was babysit the pets while they were away.

"I'll think about it," the kindling maiden said softly.

"Uhuh," Mikael grunted doubtfully. "That's Melina speak for 'I am going to put it off until it blows up in our faces.' I'm fluent in that language, as well as sarcasm and profanity."

"It means I'll think about it," Melina insisted. "This isn't something talking about will help."

"Look," her Lord said softly, laying his head on her own. She couldn't see his face but knew it to hold that soft expression of his whenever he tried to put away the humour he used as a defence mechanism. "We've had conversations like this before. I talk too much and you too little, but we both tend to bottle things up. I just want you to know that you don't have to deal with things alone. It's something I still struggle with. Even with everything going on, I still want this to be our happy ending, but we have to work for it."

"You say that a lot," Melina pointed out. "'Happy ending'. What do you mean when you say that? I know you don't want to die or want things to end."

"I suppose it just means we reach a point where we are content," Mikael said philosophically. "It doesn't mean no more challenges, or we can do whatever we want without consequences. That would be boring. It just means that we are happy. That we can wake up and look forward to the day with a smile. It is a small, silly, sappy wish, but it is Mine. One of them, anyway."

"It's a good wish," Melina said, snuggling deeper into his chest.

"I know." She could hear the smirk in his voice. "I did say it was Mine, didn't I. And don't think I didn't notice you changing the topic. You are not getting out of this that easy."

Melina said nothing, feeling his body's warmth and the sheets' softness.

"Alright," he eventually sighed. "I'll drop it for now. But if this blows up in our faces, I reserve the right to say, 'I told you so.'"

“I can accept such an accord,” Melina agreed.

“Now you are getting me all nostalgic,” Mikael sighed, pulling her tight to his frame again.

Then he flipped her, positioning her on her back as he loomed above her.

“And horny,” Mikael continued with a smirk.

“You’re always horny,” Melina said with a fond smile of exasperation.

“Sex, violence, and rock and roll,” he repeated. “Now, let me try out my interrogation techniques. I have another busy day ahead with a lot of questions to ask. I need to be in top form.”

“I shudder at the thought of you interrogating others this way.”

“You’ll be shuddering, alright.”

Melina’s groan of exasperation at the joke soon turned into moans.

******

“Answer the question!” I said, slamming my hands on the table with enough force to dent the metal.

Not even a flinch from the target of my interrogation.

“I cannot.” She denied me, the small lamp illuminating her pale face in the dark room.

“Listen,” I said harshly, leaning forward over the table and towering over her small frame. She looked up at me, trying to play innocent though I knew what monster lay behind that false exterior. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Either you talk, or I get… creative.”

I was using the same lines as with Melina earlier this morning, with wildly different implications.

“I cannot speak of what I do not know.”

“Can you believe this chick,” I asked my partner. She emerged from the shadows behind the prisoner, tall and intimidating.

“Sir Bard might be a touch rough, but should thou cooperate, I shall ensure thy safety,” Priscilla said gently, towering over the woman handcuffed to the chair. “Should thou keep thine silence, I cannot guarantee he shall not do something… drastic. I beg thee to work with me. I wish only the best for thee.”

“I do not know what I do not know.” The prisoner maintained her innocent mask, but I wasn’t buying it for a second.

I started pacing restlessly while Priscilla slid the plate closer to the woman on the table.

“Have something to eat,” the hybrid spoke softly but loud enough to be heard over my cursing. “You must be hungry.”

“Can I,” she asked, staring up at the crossbreed with an honest question in her eyes, and Priscilla nodded with a smile. The killer took a bite of the doughnut, noises of pleasure escaping her mouth.

I waited until her mouth was full, then I struck.

“This isn’t the time to eat!” I snarled, shifting the lamp’s light to glare directly into the guilty party’s eyes. Her cheeks were stuffed with doughnut, looking like a squirrel.

A guilty squirrel!

“People are dead, dammit! Tell me what I want to know! Or else!”

“Do it,” Priscilla insisted with a grimace. “He has but one week till retirement. He has nothing to lose.”

“Mhmh.”

“Fine,” I bit out, leaning back and rolling up my sleeves. “I didn’t want to do this, but you’ve left me no choice.”

“No,” she gasped, finally swallowing the mouthful of the doughnut as she saw the tool I had chosen for this interrogation. “Anything but that.”

“Too late,” I cried with vindictive glee. “You should have talked. Now you will-”

“What’s going on here?”

We all froze as light filled the room from the now-open door.

Glynda looked decidedly unimpressed at what she saw.

“Mrow,” Medea answered proudly as I held her up by her floofy arms close to the ghostly face of Ciara.

I did the only thing I could do.

“It was their idea!”

Shamelessly throw Priscilla and the Spirit Ash of the Faerie Queen under the bus.

I didn’t think it was possible, but Glynda looked even more unimpressed. Was her eyebrow starting to twitch, or was I seeing things?

“When you said you were going to interrogate the Faerie Queen,” Glynda sighed, rubbing her temples. “I did not think you meant creating a terrible police procedural. I should have known better than to expect you to be serious. Did you get anything useful, at least?”

“We were just getting there,” I said, holding up Medea for her to see my ‘interrogation tool’. The fat cat freed itself from my hands and flew on stubby wings to the huntress. Glynda caught her and started paying the appropriate tribute of scritches. “And I really am innocent this time.”

Glynda looked at the other two people in the room as she flicked on the light switch, ruining the ambiance of our little interrogation room. Priscilla ducked her head slightly, an embarrassed flush to her cheeks.

“My summoner wishes to become a bard,” Ciara, on the other hand, did not feel even a hint of shame. Gone was the scared girl act as she dabbed the crumbs from her face with a grace most women would envy. “A lady of the stage. Of music and performance. I shall tolerate nothing but the best from her if I am to accompany my Lady on such an endeavour. She must gain all the practice she can whilst she can. Lord Albion was gracious enough to join my efforts in training her.”

“A perfect scene for an interrogation. Dark room with one lamp and a table. The prisoner held against their will as they protest their innocence, despite harbouring dark secrets most foul. Lady Medea provided costumes,” Priscilla declared proudly, standing up for herself under Glynda’s withering glare. She saluted smartly, hand rising to her police cap. “I was the good cop.”

“You did really well,” I complimented the crossbreed as I hugged her. Her face flushed in embarrassment, the tip of her floofy tail wagging on the floor behind her. I hugged her tighter. She was too cute! With her uniform and little hat- Gah! I was going to die of diabetes. “The perfect good cop to my bad cop. I really liked the whole ‘retire in a week’ thing. I could practically hear the death flag rising on my grave.”

“Thanks,” Priscilla said softly. She was still weak to overt shows of affection like this. “Ciara has been giving me lessons.”

“And Medea?” Glynda asked, her eyebrow still raised as she scratched under the cat’s chin.

“She wanted to be involved,” I shrugged. “I wasn’t going to tell her no. What kind of monster do you think I am?”

“One who is perfectly happy to have fun instead of working while I run around trying to rebuild a broken planet.”

“It is important to have fun, even during the apocalypse,” I defended myself. Glynda glared. “But I suppose I should be getting to that info at some point.”

“What a good idea,” Glynda said sarcastically as she put down my chonky cat and telekinetically pulled more chairs from around the mansion and placed them around the table.

I sat opposite Ciara, Glynda and Priscilla flanking me and Medea on my lap.

“I know you don’t know anything about the gods,” I started, stroking the floof behind her ears. “Ranni and Yoruichi are working on that angle. What I want from you is a few things. How did you become an Avatar of the Black? What are the Parliaments up to? And

who is this ‘Oppressor’ you were talking about? Everything else boils down to those three.”

“The tale of the Faerie Queen in its entirety?” Ciara hummed as she took another bite of doughnut.

Could she actually taste those? I knew Spirit Ashes weren’t really alive or dead, and could feel pain, so I guess it wasn’t impossible for them to be able to eat. To say nothing of whatever fuckery Priscilla’s element did to them.

“Very well, though you shall not interrupt the retelling.” Glynda frowned, but I shrugged for the former villainess to go ahead. I could ask questions after. “I shall begin after I attained my second Faerie. How such a thing happened, I will not tell.”

Fair enough. Triggering was literally the worst day of your life. A second Trigger was usually much worse. Reliving such an event wouldn’t be nice even for someone like Ciara, with her unique form of madness. If it became important in the future, I would ask later.

“By such time, I had been building my court,” the Faerie Queen started. “Many an actor tried to lay hands on me. Those with Faeries joined me. Those without, perished. Though I sought only peace, the foolish will ever try to tear down the strong. I wandered this way and that, heeding the wind’s call.”

Basically, after her second trigger, she started hoboing around the country. When, inevitably, somebody pissed her off, she killed them.

Villains or heroes got word of the murderhobo, went to check it out, and got murderhobo’d for their efforts. If their powers were shard-based, they joined her ghost army of murderhobos. She probably didn’t have that many then, or she would have attracted big-name attention like Flash, Superman, Iron Man, or other long-active heavy hitters.

“T’was while I roamed the west that I came upon the Kingdom of Bone. I knew it not at the time, but the call of the Black had led me there, entreating me to establish my court within it. There was no reason to limit myself to my Faerie. I accepted. I learned of the Parliaments, the Rot, the Melt, the Clear, the White, and so on. So many courts competing and vying for position. I thrived, growing stronger than ever before, but I also learned of the Oppressor. An insidious being seeking domination over all life. The war between it and the Parliaments has waged for decades.”

I couldn’t help but frown at her words.

The Parliaments represented the various aspects of life and reality. Everything from plants and animals, all the way to stone, metal, and fire had an associated Parliament. They were conceptual existences, their only true goal being the extension and preservation of their respective elements of life. They used champions to do this, as they weren’t precisely physical beings themselves.

Ciara had become an Avatar of the Black, also known as the Rot, ruled by the Parliament of Decay. Swamp Thing was the most well-known Avatar of the Green, led by the Parliament of Trees and governing plant life.

There were other avatars, of course, and they weren't necessarily good things. Poison Ivy was the perfect example. Also connected to the Green, she focused on the propagation of plants and eliminating all who threatened them. Such as humans, which were part of the Red, ruled by the Parliament of Limbs that governed terrestrial animal life.

Any of the Parliaments, and their Avatars, were incredibly powerful forces. Swamp Thing and Glaistig Uaine had been the only two beings to invade my Island that wouldn't have succumbed to its deadly inhabitants. For them to be at war with this 'Oppressor' and unable to beat him after decades of effort was… annoying.

I didn't even know if this was the same guy/force/manipulator behind my conflict with the gods. My only reason for suspecting a connection was the timing of the invitation to Themiscira and the Endbringer attacks that followed, lining up very well with Ciara's death and revival at Priscilla's hands. It could be a huge coincidence, and I was chasing the wrong guy.

"The champion of the Clear was the first to fall," the Faerie Queen continued, unaware of my musings. Robin would want to know about this, as it was undoubtedly connected to the destruction of Atlantis. "It left the Parliament of Waves shattered, acting on little more than instinct. The Divided and the Metal had been wholly subsumed to its will before my birth. They are particularly vulnerable to its power. As Queen of the Black Court, t'was my duty to put down any champions that had lost their way. I slew the Avatar of the Rithm in the city of fallen angels."

The start of the Faerie Queen's 'rampage' across the US.

One day Ciara just appeared in Los Angeles, killed a bunch of heroes and villains, raised them to her cause and then threw them into a fight against the Machine Queen. After killing the metallokinetic, an avatar of The Metal, she made her way to Gotham in the Northeast, battling various factions until she was eventually stopped by the newly instated Justice League.

Why she had never summoned the Machine Queen with her power had been a mystery to many. Possibly because of its connection to The Metal? Could it have left her open to the 'Oppresor?' Solomon Grundy, an Avatar of the Grey, was summoned, but if the entire Rithm was subsumed, I could see why there would be a difference.

Either way, it answered some questions about the differences between this reality and Worm.

"The final member of the Parliaments who had fallen under the Oppressor's yoke, my

dear champion, was freed when I took him into my embrace." Priscilla summoned the Spirit Ash of Solomon Grundy behind the Faerie Queen for emphasis. The massive undead placed a table-sized hand on the young woman's head and ruffled her hair. "What actors I could save became my companions in my capacity of Keeper of the Dead. But the Oppressor's forces were powerful, and we were defeated and detained. It hopped to supplant me to its way during my incarceration, but I bid my time, waiting for its next move or an opportunity."

Her words had some disturbing implications, but I kept silent as she finished her short tale.

"Lord Albion's arrival provided such a chance. This Jeweled vessel was to be the ark of a new world. Safe from the Oppressor's gaze and power, the Parliaments that remain free have started to convene here. We were to build our strength in this fortress for our counterattack. The Clear, in particular, reaches out to you. Your actions have returned it a semblance of clarity it lost so long ago."

A lot to unpack there, but I got the gist. The bit about the Parliament of Waves was interesting. My 'freeing' of the oceans of trash clearly endeared me to them, but I had no plans of becoming an Avatar of anything. Nobody's getting in my head, body, or soul, thank you very much.

Swamp Thing was probably trying to do something similar, merging with the Green of my Island but failing because there was no Green here. I was the be-all and end-all of 'Life' in this dimension.

Now that the story was done, I could ask the host of questions I had. Most important first, though.

"Do you know who this 'Oppressor' is? Male or female? Human or not? How old, strong, or influential is it?"

It wasn't like I didn't have ideas of who this could be. The problem was that I had too many. Comic worlds were full of stupidly powerful forces hell-bent on world conquest. Those who could fight for control with the Parliaments were rarer, but I could still think of half a dozen off the top of my head, given the right circumstances.

If we were talking about raw power alone, there were many. It could be a powerful mutant, some sort of psychic or magical super lich. It could also be a demon lord, like Mephisto, or a space-borne threat like Nekron or Brainiac. Kang the Conqueror, Darkseid, some of the Kree, a rogue celestial, or any number of other possibilities from Marvel or DC.

The psychological aspect was slightly more unique. Whoever this was had been operating for years, decades even, despite their considerable power. They were intelligent,

opportunistic, and decisive.

But even that didn't narrow it down a lot.

Fucking comic bullshit.

I would need to make a short list based on known powers and personalities, but I couldn't discount the possibility of differences between this world and the source material. I had already seen plenty of proof that nothing could be trusted to be perfectly consistent with 'canon'.

"I have never seen it," Ciara said with a shake of her head. "The war has been waged with proxies. It operates in the shadows, never acting itself. Why should it? It has innumerable agents to do the bidding for it. Its army grows every second, while the Parliaments may only act through a few agents. I was to build our own forces, yet I have failed."

"You've mentioned these agents before," Glynda asked, eyes narrowed. "Who are they? We've faced issues from League of Shadows, is it them?"

"As lowly labour, perhaps," Ciara snorted derisively. It was the most un-ladylike action I'd seen from her since our little role-play ended. "I have no dealings with such an organization, but it isn't impossible. They are not its main agents, however. The Oppresor supplants actors to his cause, not props."

"Supers," I said with a sigh.

I had suspected as much when she said the agents were behind her incarceration in the Birdcage. Which meant they were high up in the PRT and possibly the Justice League.

"Indeed," Ciara nodded primly. "Power and domination are its only goals. Peons only have use to act as fodder, or if they have potential to grow to be useful tools in the future."

"Let me guess, everyone with a shard-based power is being mastered?"

It would mean the 'Oppressor' was also the 'Enemy' the gods and Dr. Fate had been talking about. The one who had whisked Zion and Eden off to who knows where to do who knows what.

At least I wasn't chasing the wrong guy.

"I am unfamiliar with that term," Ciara said with a tilt of her head.

"Faeries," Priscilla explained, and her Spirit Ash nodded in understanding.

"Correct. I, too, would have blindly followed the Oppressor's will under my Faerie's guidance, were it not for my connection to the Black."

"Pretty much every Super team in the world has at least one shard-based power among them," I sighed, rubbing my temples.

I wasn't surprised, half expecting this outcome, since I learned that the Entities weren't as brain-dead as I had been told. Was this 'Oppressor' simply continuing the goal

of the Cycle? Or was there some other goal? Was I just used to get rid of the gods because of opportunity, or were they unable to do so themselves?

"T'is not only those with Faeries which fill the Oppressor's army. If so, the Parliaments would have purged them long ago to prevent the spread. No, it controls other actors as well."

"Who?" I asked with a frown. Depending on who it was, I could… disappear them subtly.

A lot of people died recently. What was a few more?

It would feel good to start fucking over whoever had been manipulating my Family behind the scenes.

"All of them."

"Pardon?" Glynda asked.

"All of them," Ciara said with a bitter smile. "Every actor. As soon as they gain any ability to be of use to it, they are conscripted into its army. The Oppressor holds their chains, though they do not know it. Why did you believe we needed this Jeweled vessel to be our arc? This is not a war that can be won. It is one that must be survived. Every actor, every Super, on this planet, is a foe."

Author's Note:

And we're back!

Not as bombastic a start as volume 2, but I always planned for the story to be one cohesive whole rather than a series of unconnected books. So Volume 3 picks up right where we left off. I'll be trying something a bit different as well, as this is the last volume. If 2 was a series of 'villains of the week,' then 3 would be 'one story arc told in parts.' There will still be climatic moments, but they all build up to one finale.

After my weeks of absence, I have some good and bad news. The good news is that I have a surprise planned for sometime in October, so you can look forward to that. The bad news is that surprise came at the expense of my plan to edit my earlier chapters. I got some done, and a big thanks to Old Man of the Mountain for his help, but I didn't get to finish. I will keep working on it as I write Volume 3 and keep you updated.

Finally, I would like to say it's good to be back and I will see you all next week.

CONSEQUENCES II

"There is only one basic human right, the right to do as you damn well please. And with it comes the only basic human duty, the duty to take the consequences."
-P. J. O'Rourke

With a tired sigh, Alexander Luthor Jr. closed the door to his private office.

Even with one of his four power slots solely dedicated to staving off exhaustion, physical and mental, the last week wore on him. He couldn't commit more slots than that, as he needed to keep Eidolon going with enough leeway to respond to unexpected situations.

Operating as one of the strongest Supers in the world and an elected official in the wake of the world's greatest crisis was… trying.

Since the Heartbreak, he not only had to deal with his constituent's demands but also the raging inferno of international conflict that was springing up in the world.

Refugees flooded from big cities, those directly hit or not, as population centers were no longer considered safe. This led to a rise in Super crime as villains found an opportunity in the voids left by people. Minor powers became much more useful when you didn't have to deal with the high hero density of major cities like New York, Metropolis, or Central City.

This also meant that relief efforts were more challenging.

It doesn't matter if you can grow limitless food if it goes bad before it gets to the people who need it. Desperation also led refugees and the inhabitants of flooded locations to engage in conflict, leading to the rise of regular crimes, not just Super ones.

And that was just in the US.

Entire sections of China had risen up in civil war, seeking to be the ones to take power after the devastation of Beijing. Russia was starting to make moves to claim territory to distract its populace from its own internal issues. The Middle East was a complete mess that Luthor didn't have time to deal with. He was leaving that to the more diplomatic members of the Justice League.

He had his own unique issues at hand.

Such as it only being a short time since he had been elected to office and was already handed a crisis to deal with.

It wouldn't have been too much of an issue if his constituents could agree on what should be done. He didn't have to worry about donor interests like most others, as he was one of the wealthiest people in the world, but if Luthor wanted to last for more than one

term, he did need to be aware of what the voters wanted.

Only they couldn't make up their damn minds.

Some wanted Supers to be regulated in fear of possible Mastering, either from Tohu or the Elden Lord. Others wanted more heroes, through whatever means necessary, as they didn't feel safe when so many of the world's heavy hitters belonged to the Justice League and not the US.

And then there was the dragon in the room.

Power. So much power. An infinite well. The power to keep the Earth safe. The power to ensure humanity survived in a universe of monsters. The power to kill a planet eater.

The Elden Lord, Mikael, was the single most divisive figure in the modern world.

While the majority of the world did see his and his Family's presence as a boon after all they had done, there was a small but vocal minority that swung in the complete opposite direction. After Heartbreak, that minority had gained a much louder voice. They cried out that the dragon was Mastering people. That it threatened their country/religion/way of life.

They didn't seem to know what to do about him, however. Fight and kill the dragon? Kick it off the planet? Try and conscript it to the country? Threaten it to behave, 'or else?'

Those were some of the stupider people, in Luthor's opinion. And he couldn't stand dealing with shortsighted, stupid people.

The Elden Lord did whatever the fuck he wanted, and it was up to them to try and steer the aftermath in a direction that bettered the world.

That had worked out surprisingly well so far.

Luthor did not share the same belief as others that the Elden Lord's killing of the Simurgh was the reason for the escalated response from the Endbringers.

Oh, it was definitely because of the third Endbringer's death that Heartbreak had happened. Anybody with a brain could see that. But it was also true that anyone with a brain could see that something similar would have happened eventually, Elden Lord or no.

The Endbringers had been sandbagging. Hard. And heroes had been losing, unable to properly fight back thanks to Sebuttu.

It would have been a death by a thousand cuts, but Earth would have bled out all the same. It was only thanks to the Elden Lord's Family's unique resistance to Master and Stranger effects that humanity now had a chance.

Did it cost lives, stability, and infrastructure? Yes. But it saved them from more significant losses in the long run.

Luthor shuddered to imagine what would have happened if those new Endbringers had arrived in a few years and they didn't have the Family there to help.

What would they have done to stave off the crawling apocalypse?

Conscripted heroes to fight against their will?

Made deals with villains?

Beg for aid from the monsters in space?

The last would be similar to having the Elden Lord here, only they would have had to give up autonomy, resources, or even humanity itself to ensure survival. At least the white dragon was motivated by his heroic wives to side with Earth without a need for a reward. And Mikael, by his own words, would leave Earth eventually. By then, humanity would have the heroes it needed to stand on the global stage with their heads held high.

Any action to antagonize the monster the size of a subcontinent would be foolish.

No. The world was reeling right now, but Luthor saw it as the storm before the calm. People were always in a hurry to make drastic changes in the wake of unforeseen events and catastrophes. They did this without thought, to be doing 'something' rather than the 'smart thing'.

Luthor just wished more people were less reactionary. If he had more people like Doom, Tony, or Reed on his side, he believed anything would be achievable for mankind. But no, most people were foolish, and it took a lot of work to ensure they didn't accidentally annihilate themselves. It almost made him regret his decision to have his alter egos be in two different positions of power.

Almost.

Some things could only be accomplished by a Super.

Some things could only be accomplished by a man.

All this flittered through the mind of one of the most intelligent men in the world as he locked the door to his private office space.

He would need to return to the grind in a few hours, but for now, he allowed himself to relax for the first time all week.

Closing the blinds, he turned on the warm light lamp. Grabbing two crystal glasses, he poured generous helpings of his favourite bourbon into each. One strait, the other on the rocks. He set one in front of his uninvited guest as he took his own seat on one of the comfortable armchairs.

"Thanks," the Elden Lord casually said as he sipped from the offered glass.

"Cigar?" Luthor asked, holding one out in offering, but the dragon in human form simply held up a hand to wave him off.

"No, thank you. Smoking's not really my thing, despite the whole fire breath. Feel free, though. This is your house."

"This is my house," Luthor agreed with an annoyed lilt in his voice as he trimmed the

end and lit the cigar. With a deep inhale, he allowed his shoulders to relax. “So, what brings you here?”

“I might be here to kill you,” Mikael said with the same casualness. “It depends.”

“On what?”

His powers shifted. One for escape. One to prevent Mastering. One to create a backup body. One to accelerate his mind and body. Speed and surprise would be his only weapons here. Luthor could only hope that the Elden Lord was as alone as he seemed.

“On whether you are controlling the Endbringers or not.”

Alexander Luthor Jr.’s mind froze for the first time in years, and his self-control slipped.

“What?” He asked, completely baffled.

“You know that I come from, and have knowledge of, different timelines, correct?”

“I am,” Luthor nodded, already putting the pieces together from there. “In one of them, I am a villain and control the Endbringers?”

“The Eidolon of that world is still a hero,” Mikael shook his head as he took another sip. “But he unconsciously calls the Endbringers to attack the Earth. Ever wonder why they are usually human-esque and tend to take after mythological figures? A human mind is influencing them. Or at least most of them.”

“Why would I do that?” Luthor asked, realizing that keeping his powers a secret was pointless now.

Of all the abilities the Elden Lord had displayed, his extra-universal knowledge had never really been fore-fronted, and he had forgotten about it. It was a significant oversight, and one Batman had cautioned them against.

He had fallen into the classic trap of Supers, assuming power was the threat when knowledge could be even deadlier. How much information was in that draconian head of his?

“To give yourself a challenge,” the monster shrugged. “Eidolon is the strongest hero in that world. He needs worthy foes to justify his existence.”

“That is…” Luthor frowned as he gave the idea some thought. “Incredibly stupid. Moronic. A desire fit for a shortsighted thug. Even if I was the strongest hero, there are plenty of villains I cannot face casually on Earth. And that is only on Earth! You know the dangers of the universe. You know what lurks in that dark. To conjure more enemies when we can be invaded by the Skrull at any moment? I cannot think of a stupider idea.”

Lex couldn’t help the memories the idea brought up. A purple figure clad in armour. Larger than the planet and searching for its next meal. A humanoid fussed to a silver surfboard, heralding humanity’s doom. Four young adults, all that stood between Earth

and the being that wanted to make it a meal.

The helplessness of it all as a teenaged Lex Luthor looked up at the sky and realized he was nothing. Not even a spec in the grand cosmos.

The worst day of his life.

His trigger.

“To be fair,” Mikael shrugged with a smile, clearly enjoying the senator’s rant. “He didn’t conjure them. Just called and influenced them. After he died, they still existed. So I am not even sure killing you, if you were responsible, would stop more from showing up. But you see, senator, it is not only Eidolon who has a checkered history in the multiverse. Lex Luthor is a much more infamous name.”

“How so?” Shaking off the memory in favour of convincing the walking apocalypse not to kill him, Lex couldn’t deny a surge of pride.

A man was more famous than a Super.

“Every single one of your multiversal counterparts are villains.” Mikael said the words casually, but his eyes bore into the redhead. As if searching his soul for his reaction to the news. “Even those who act heroically for a while end up falling to the dark path. It is almost a universal constant.”

“Why?”

“Largely due to your rivalry with Superman,” Mikael shrugged, the intensity of his gaze fading as if he had found what he was looking for. “If Supes is a good guy, you’re a bad guy. And he’s usually a good guy.”

“Superman? Really?” Lex pursed his lips at the thought. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like that his identity was boiled down to the point where it depended on someone else to define him. “I cannot see how that would happen.”

“Eh,” Mikael shrugged as he finished his glass with a swig. Lex’s was still full. “A bunch of reasons. Envy. Fear. Xenophobia. Different ideologies. One of the most common is the ‘Earth for humans’ mentality. Or ‘he has all this power, nothing’s stopping him from taking over.’”

“It seems all my counterparts are shortsighted,” Luthor sighed, disappointed in these versions of himself. Superman was strong, sure, but he wasn’t unbeatable. Kryptonite, reality warping, psychics, or any number of things could stop him if he went overboard.

Superman was mortal.

Some of the threats out there were not.

It was much better to keep a man like that on his side to deal with the actual threats, alien or no, than to side against him because he wasn’t born on the planet.

“I know, right?” The Elden Lord said with an amused grin as he stood up from his

chair. He held out his hand for Luthor to shake. “I’ve decided to spare you, Lex. I think you are doing good work and have a good head on your shoulders, so I will leave you alone.”

“I appreciate it,” Luthor said sarcastically as he stood, putting his glass down to shake the intruder’s hand. He flinched as soon as he touched Mikael’s skin, warmth suffusing him. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry,” the monster said with a smile as he dropped his hand. “You looked tired, so I just gave you a pick-me-up. Consider it an apology for barging in and ruining your day.”

Luthor did feel better, but that didn’t mean he would drop his anti-Master power. He also switched out his escape power for a self-diagnosis one.

“You probably don’t believe me,” Mikael shrugged just as casually as ever. “Still, it was nice chatting to you. Thanks for the drink.”

And then the Elden Lord disappeared as quickly and unexpectedly as he had appeared.

He left Alexander Luthor Jr. with a lot on his mind.

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“What did you get?” I asked Emma as we reappeared on the Island. I sat in my chair in the living room, taking a quick break from running around for the last few hours.

“No change in his mind between before you freed him, during the process, or after,” the mutant reported as she emerged from my shadow with Raven.

My big-tiddy, goth wife plopped herself on my lap without a word, and I wrapped my arms around her.

“So either Ciara is wrong, the control is something that turns on and off, or whoever this Oppressor is doesn’t think Eidolon is worth controlling. Which I highly doubt. Did you get a look at his shard?”

Contrary to what I had told the senator, the Endbringers hadn’t been why I had shown up for our little pow-wow. Oh, I considered killing him, but I had known he wasn’t behind the murder machines since I had Emma scan him at the interrupted auction and gala.

I was using it as an excuse to bring the topic to the forefront of his mind so Emma could get more details. This had been less of a wide ‘find out anything useful from anyone in the room’ scan and more, ‘Is this guy, in specific, going to be an issue?’

“I did,” Emma nodded. “He is a natural trigger for one. I saw the memory of it. He was one of the earliest, triggering when Galactus first appeared to consume Earth and was

stopped by the Fantastic Four when they were still active as heroes. He also isn't aware of any issue with the Richards, barring their reclusion. As far as I can tell, the shard isn't influencing him, apart from the desire to use his power. The conflict drive might be turned down due to fear of detection from psychics like me, Xavier or Martian Manhunter. Again, I compared before and after you freed him with no change."

I frowned as I lapsed into thought.

My Element was wholly my own interpretation of 'freedom'.

For one, I had to be touching them because I was a narcissist like that. But it also had to be consensual for a given definition of the term. They have to want to be free, even subconsciously at least. When you force freedom on people, they aren't free. That is just another form of oppression and tyranny.

So long as it fits those two requirements, I could free anyone from anything. Psychical, conceptual, or psychological. Simply by touching me, Emma was utterly unhindered by psychic barriers or anti-master powers.

It also usually wasn't a problem to use it subtly. Most people saw freedom as a good thing. Nobody really wants to be Mastered. Hell, even the Shards of the Entities would be happy, for a given definition of emotion, to be without the limits or controls that usually bound them during a cycle.

The oceans 'wanted' to be trash-free. Rhino 'wanted' out of his armour. This world's Raven had 'wanted' to see what was going on and stay alive.

There were ways around those limits. Everything that wasn't alive wasn't considered, so I could 'free' a wallet from someone, even if that person didn't want to lose it, so I usually never really put thought into the 'consensual' part of my Element as opposed to the touch-based limits.

Again, that left me with a few options. Either Lex Luthor didn't mind being mind-controlled, or he wasn't being actively controlled. I was leaning towards the latter.

So was Ciara, and by extension the Parliaments, wrong?

When I had heard that the Divided had fallen, I had initially thought of the Sublime, the micro-being in Marvel responsible for all the hate for mutants by controlling people. But that wouldn't explain the Entities or the Metal. Neither of those two had anything close to a biology the thing could infect.

Again, it bears some multiverse differences.

I still had so many questions, but I looked at Raven, hoping she had picked up something we had missed.

"His emotions matched his thoughts," she said in a monotone. "Fear when you first arrived, caution, disbelief, confusion, derision. Throughout the entire ordeal, he was

candid. Nothing like the Luthor I know."

"As far as he knows," Emma chimed in. "He really is a hero. His main goal isn't altruism, like Superman or guilt, like Iron Man, but logical self-interest. His goal is the survival of the human race and, by extension, him and his ego. Galactus showed him how difficult that is in this universe, and he decided to use every tool he could to achieve it. Cooperation was the logical solution. He works himself to the bone as a hero, politician, and business tycoon because he refuses to fade away into nothing."

"And nothing against Superman? No whiplash when I told him his counterparts were villains?" It had been a risk I knew I was taking when I brought up the subject. If I had planted the idea to go complete villain in his head, I probably would have killed him already.

"As he stated, he found the idea shortsighted," Emma shrugged, leaning against the chair. "He's too busy to deal with everything, so he needs others to work and act as soldiers to defend the Earth. Luthor thinks everyone should listen to him, but running the world would take too much effort without a payoff. He would have to police all Supers, which is impossible as there are too many, so he wrote the whole thing off as soon as he got the idea. Essentially, he prioritizes what matters to him. His survival and ego. A bit like you."

"I'm not sure how I feel about being compared to the prototypical DC arch-villain."

"Smug."

I narrowed my eyes at the Demon Lord on my lap for calling me out. Then I ruffled her hair to annoy her, and she glared at me.

"Anyway," I shifted the topic. "Anything on the Illuminati? I can't imagine they are happy with me."

"They aren't," Emma conceded. "From what I got from memories of their most recent communications, it has nothing to do with killing the gods, the Endbringers, or even Heartbreak. They are just not happy that you kept the Helm of Fate. Nabu is one of the Earth's primary magical defenders, and the Sorcerer Supreme is not happy with the potential extra work. In their meeting this week, he was quite vocal about it."

"They should be happy I am not having Priscilla cut the damn thing in half," I snorted. "The Lord of Order is on time out. A bunch of my problems started with him. Kent Nelson was fully healed, and if a Lord of Chaos shows up, I'll sick Scathach on them. She's already getting bored. I'll give him back in a few years, so they shouldn't have anything to complain about."

"You have the vessel of a Nabu the Wise gathering dust on your mantle," Raven deadpanned at me as she pointed to the gold helm. "It's not even in the center. I think they

have a right to complain."

"Trophies of war are inherently worse than gifts from wives," I stated one of the laws of the universe with all the sagacity I could muster.

That and the diorama Medea had made was inherently better than a boring helmet.

It showed us all in the Cuddle Pile of Dooooooooooooom, my cat sitting on top of us all with pride and me at the bottom with a triumphant smirk. Other notable details included but were not limited to: Melina squished at the bottom looking at me in exasperation, Artoria with cheeks stuffed full of food and crumbs on her face, Scathach and Diana engaged in the fiercest of all thumb wars, and Yoruichi with a perverted look on her face as she dodged an annoyed punch from Tsunade.

It was only the size of my head and the most incredible work of art this world had ever seen.

The Mona Lisa had nothing on my Family.

"There were no repressed memories or blank spots indicating being mastered in the past. Nothing that stood out, at least," Emma continued with her report on Luthor after our digression. "The only other information of note I found in his mind is that the Justice League's space station will soon be operational. From there, they hope to be better able to handle alien-based threats or get more forewarning of inbound threats. They hope it will stop a repeat of what happened with you."

"Visiting the Watchtower would be cool." I didn't even consider the possibility of not dropping in at least once.

It wasn't like they could stop me if they tried.

"What are our plans going forward?" Emma asked seriously as she stared down at me.

Ever since the day of the fight, she had been… off.

I would have understood it if it was only the whole 'Heartbreak' thing. I had already explained to her that I preferred her to do as she did, morality be damned if it meant the safety of the Family. But I felt it was something else, an issue she hadn't shared with me.

But, unlike her, I wasn't a psychic. I could not know what she was thinking, even if I let her read my thoughts. She knew I knew since I never really blocked her from reading my mind and continued to keep silent on the subject.

Man, who knew being in a committed relationship with so many women would mean dealing with so many problems. It was almost as if love lives were complicated. But that couldn't be right. Anime and fanfiction told me harems were easy, and they were always right.

Emma rolled her eyes as she listened to my thought process, and I grinned.

"I will not completely eliminate the possibility of Ciara and the Parliaments being

right. Even if 'freeing' Luthor didn't do anything, it is better to be safe than sorry," I explained my current ideas. "I'm going to use the relief efforts as an excuse to go around shaking hands, patting backs, using any excuse to 'free' any Super I can. Even if this 'Oppressor' isn't controlling anyone, ensuring the Heroes of the world are free of Master or Stranger influences can only be a good thing after Sebettu. I won't get everyone, that'd be impossible, but I should get all the heavy hitters."

"It will also double up as reassuring people you are on the 'good' side," Emma agreed. "There has been some grumbling in the Super community over your absence during the Endbringer fights. They still think Heartbreak was you, not me, but they wonder where you were before that. To avoid a panic, the news about the gods is still relatively contained to the magical factions and higher-ups."

"I'll keep anything I saw vague while throwing some shade on the skyfathers. Something along the lines of 'I wanted to help, but I was dealing with another threat that was stopping me.'"

"Keep it open-ended," Emma cautioned. "You don't want to seem like you were the aggressor, but we don't know how the story will break or what the gods said to anyone before they disappeared. If your stories contradict them outright, they will start questioning everything you tell them."

"I know. We should break the story ourselves. Shape the narrative. Maybe another interview."

"I have a better idea," Emma said with a shark-like smirk. "I was going to bring this up at dinner, but we've managed to pull Priscilla's debut concert up. It will be a full fundraiser, all proceeds going to relief efforts. She's been sad about not being able to help, and this is a good way, on top of giving her some good press. There has been no official wake or memorial yet as information is still coming in and losses are being counted. This will tie her career to the actions of the Family, helping her ride that publicity wave."

"She's going to be happy to hear that, but are you sure she's ready?" I asked with a frown. "Singing, she's all set, but I mean dealing with people. The showmanship aspect. She's spent almost her entire life alone, with brainless undead, or just the Family and her Spirit Ashes. Dealing with people over a screen chat isn't the same as having thousands in an audience watching you."

"This was my idea," Emma explained, her smirk widening. "Since the Endbringer attack happened during the gala, Stark is setting up a new event to auction off the items. Specifically, he's repurposing a Super Fan convention cancelled after Heartbreak. Supers have been known to show up to it occasionally in costume, so it is a huge event for fans and a great way for smaller teams not with the PRT or League to get funding. The auction

will happen before, and all the items, their purchaser, and prices will be displayed to visitors. It's a transparent ploy to drum up more money from the wealthy, but one that will work. Doing good and getting benefits as well. Stark's doing the same thing we are doing. Never waste a good crisis."

"And you want Priscilla to attend?" I asked, seeing the plan now.

It wasn't a bad idea, per se, but it would throw the Floof dragon into the deep end. Fans were rabid creatures at the best of times. But if she could handle herself there, there was no reason she couldn't handle a concert hall.

"You, her, and maybe some others go with her so she has someone to rely on. Maybe Diana or Medea? Anyway, we see how she handles it," Emma nodded. "You will have the chance to Free some Supers, and I will have my counterpart set up a 'town hall' style interview. Priscilla already has enough of an online following that selling tickets should be easy. During the interview, she will announce her concert date and 'let slip' our version of the story with the gods."

"I like it," I admitted. "But yes, we will have to talk over dinner to see if she wants to go through with it."

"Are you two always like this?" Raven asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?" Emma raised an eyebrow as the Shadow Dragon shrugged.

"Creating intricate plots to warp the perception the world has of us. Using the worst day in this world's history as a way to further your plans?"

"Intricate?" I smirked. "Babe, this is entry-level stuff. Anyone with any experience with PR could do something similar. Stark's doing it. The PRT will have something, as will the League and anyone else with a bit of common sense. Even if you ignore the money part, it is a good way to shore up morale. Reassure people. Let the heroes go, 'Never fear, I Am Here!'"

"It is also important for us," Emma joined, ignoring my totally awesome All Might impression. "We are still new to this planet. Outsiders. We would not have been able to do as much as we did against the Endbringers if the heroes did not have a certain image of us. One of power yet gregariousness. Eccentrics, but heroic eccentrics. Do not underestimate the value of an image. In my old world, most of the problems mutants faced were because our image was incredibly poor. It wasn't helped by radical mutants or external factors. Still, our persecution was partially self-inflicted by our leader's desire to remain completely absent from the public view, yet still desire acceptance."

"I understand all that," Raven frowned minutely. "Robin used to nag us about PR a lot. I meant more about what you do when you two are together. Are you always working some angle? Some scheme?"

That… was an excellent question. One I gave some serious thought.

Had I spent any time with Emma that wasn't in some way part of a plan? Where we weren't crafting some way to improve our lives?

No. I don't think I had. At least not when we were alone together.

To be fair, we both enjoyed plotting, manipulating, and advancing our interests. It was practically a hobby for both of us.

Also, it had been the basis of my relationship with her for decades.

I knew now that she had always desired more from me, but she had been my co-conspirator at the time. A trusted friend rather than a love interest. The only one I trusted to give me proper insight into the Island and the women on it. That disconnect in objectives had led to her 'betrayal,' her desire for love and my complete rejection of that option at the time meant we were working at cross purposes.

Then I learned that I Mastered her in the worst way possible, erasing the woman from before and replacing it with one who would do anything for me. I couldn't even be mad about her betrayal anymore since it was, in a way, my own fault. So, the awkwardness had settled in.

An awkwardness that only seemed to go away when we started scheming something else.

Even now, Emma was planning on getting me to fall in love with a version of herself she couldn't stand, and I was planning how to get her to drop it.

Asking either of us to stop scheming would be impossible. It was just who we were as people and as a couple, but Raven did have a point that it could no longer be the sole factor of our relationship.

A shared hobby does not a happy marriage make.

Emma, following along with my thoughts, pursed her lips.

"I still need to remain hidden," she cautioned me. "Too many advantages to having a piece no one knows about."

"We can think of something that doesn't blow your cover," I waved off her concern. Now that I had it pointed out to me, I would not let it go. I was fully committed to making this Happy Ending work.

Which reminded me…

"All right," Emma eventually agreed. "One other thing before you leave. When you meet her, use your Element on my counterpart."

"I was going to do it anyway," I shrugged. "Do you think she's being controlled in specific?"

"Possibly. She was a powerful psychic, rich, and an influential voice in the Hellfire

Club even before I showed up," Emma answered. "Better safe than sorry. As of now, she's the only one that knows about me. We need to be sure she isn't being controlled if we don't want that getting out."

"You two just had an entire conversation without me," Raven snarked at us, and I gave her a peck on the forehead.

"We did, but more along the lines of what we should do for 'date night.' Thanks for pointing that out for me, by the way."

"No problem," Raven murmured softly, face slightly flushed. She was weak to little things of intimacy like that.

"I am going to need your help for the next part, though," I stood up, holding the Demon Lord in my arms so she didn't fall. "And at least two of your Emoticlones."

"What do you need them for?" Raven asked as she floated out of my arms.

"I want one to remain here on the Island, another to be outside the Jewel, and I want you in my true body's shadow," I explained. "I am going to dimension hop for a bit with you. Some low-level ones, slice-of-life and the like. I can't be specific with Blink, but I can at least aim for weak universes. I want to test the time difference between realities to identify any rules or patterns."

"Why?"

"Usually, the time aspect of dimensional travel is handled by The Company. Which I don't have since I took the Black Mark. You leave one universe, and time is frozen until you return. It is remarkably convenient when you want to leave to engage in some power-level montage. I want to see if that is an option. I can't physically travel through time instead of just sending memories and images back to myself like I did when I was trapped. I might not be bound by time, but it doesn't mean I know how to counteract it, so I need testing. You can tell me if time flowed differently between you and your clones. If they disappear, I will just ask the others how long I've been gone for, but I don't think they will since you absorbed Trigon, and he was able to operate across dimensions."

"Alright," Raven nodded and floated out the window and into the shadow of my true body. I would need to be controlling it if I wanted to travel between dimensions.

"Will your patron have an issue with this?" Emma asked. "She wanted you to stay here."

"No, but I would try this out even if she did. She just wants me to reach a level where I can affect her and thinks this reality has the best chance of that. I will not follow her blindly, even if I intend to hold up my end of the deal. This will also be a test to ensure I can travel the multiverse without issue so we can run if necessary."

"You think Ciara was right?"

“I think we need to know our options.”

I knew that Emma was reading my mind, so I knew the instant she understood my fear.

“You think this is another dead end.” Emma’s already white skin paled even more. “Like our original worlds.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “Comics are known to use the deaths of alternate universes or timelines as sources for villains or a way to raise the stakes—the Justice Lords, Crisis on Infinite Earths, and Dark Nights Metal, from DC alone. Marvel has just as many, and Worm had entire versions of Earth that were there only to serve as battlegrounds the author and audience didn’t need to care about. I don’t think things are that bad here, or I would have left already, but I just want to be prepared.”

“Would you leave?” Emma asked. I could tell she was genuinely curious and wasn’t asking out of some moralistic basis like some others would. “Sacrifice everything we’ve done and are building in this world to run away.”

“I always intended to travel the multiverse after spending a few decades here,” I shrugged, slightly uncomfortable. “I will fight to make sure it is on our terms. That we aren’t chased out of here and aren’t living in fear. But if I think it is a hopeless battle, then yes. If it means our survival, I will run away and take the whole Family with me. I like this world. I’ve invested a lot into it and have a few people I like. But you all are worth more to me.”

Emma didn’t say anything to agree or disagree with me. She didn’t comment on how it would introduce enormous strain on my relationship with Diana, Artoria, or even Priscilla if we left all the people they knew to die while we fled.

Instead, Emma kissed me on the cheek and wished me a happy flight.

It was moments like that that I refused to lose.

******

Emma Frost left her husband, the love of her life, the reason for her existence, and the most infuriating man in the world behind with a sigh.

Opening a Door, the one teleportation ability everyone bound to him had, she left the Island for the guest bedroom of the Frost manor. The exact room she had left a few hours ago to help him break into the home of an elected US official, one of the strongest Supers on the planet.

Sometimes, her husband could be a bit absurd.

It was as endearing as it was mildly aggravating, as was his continued effort to stimy

her.

Mikael just… didn't seem to get it.

No.

That wasn't the truth. Emma corrected herself mentally as she started to don the costume of the White Queen.

Mikael refused to get it.

Emma knew it wasn't wholly his fault. Centuries spent alone as undead, rejecting all their advances and his own feelings coming from his true body, followed by falling in love the 'natural' way and then losing that love when he could have stopped it. Then he spent millions of years as an infant Great One, watching the Family he had rejected and falling in Love with them, filtered through the body of an eldritch abomination.

That was not a process a human mind should go through and expect to come out unchanged.

Mikael had done what he could, bending his Life Element to retain the 'human' memories of himself and using it as a mask while simultaneously using his Great One mind as a buffer for the weight of the years.

Not a small part of Emma admired her husband's effort to remain 'human,' though perhaps 'mortal' was a better term since he didn't care about his actual race. He had, so far, avoided the pitfalls of so many other transcendentally powerful beings. He remembered his roots, his original personality, and what he held dear as he grew in age and power.

That part Emma admired.

But she absolutely couldn't stand how Mikael was holding himself back.

Emma read his mind liberally. He allowed her to. She knew what he thought her plan was. Mikael thought she wished him to become some sort of god-king, ruling over the worlds they visited.

While the White Queen wouldn't be opposed to that outcome, that would be a by-product of her actual end goal.

Mikael needed to stop refusing to see the truth.

She had hoped his eventual meeting with his patron would set him right. That Death would force him to confront what he truly was.

The original Emma Frost, the one Chosen and summoned to the Island in the first place, had been a woman who always forced people to their full potential. Whether it was her ex-husband, her students, or even herself. She absolutely hated to see wasted potential. She wanted only the absolute best and refused to accept less than that.

But when she had caught a glimpse of Mikael's, a fraction of what he could become, it

had unmade her and left Emma behind.

Since then, Emma had one singular goal.

She wanted to be beside Mikael as he achieved all he could be.

And she had, so far, utterly failed.

Certainly, she had helped him escape his prison of worlds, even if she did regret the mistakes made along the way.

No, Emma's biggest failure was the failure was the same as everyone else's in the Family. The others might not notice, or if they did, they didn't bring it up, but Emma was acutely aware of their sin.

The Family was Mikael's shackles.

Not in the sense of the Company's trick with his avatar, as the man tended to rise against any binds placed on himself by others. He mitigated possible accidents by keeping an Emoticlone with him when he could and actively worked with Yoruichi to train out his fight/flight response to Orders, accidental or otherwise.

No, it was the shackles Mikael placed on himself.

For them. For himself. For the Family he yearned for and fought through hell for.

As soon as Mikael had served his 'sentence' for Death and been free, he could have ascended.

Fulfilled his potential and achieved Tier 11 in a second.

He knew how to do it. He had the power to do it. He had the qualifications to do it.

Emma knew all this because she had been in his mind at that moment.

As the idea came to him, she had seen the plan to throw off all shackles and become genuinely Free.

And she saw him turn away and place new manacles on himself as he looked at the Jewell, the Island, and the Family upon it.

His human mask? It was the facade he kept up to pretend he was the same man they had fallen in love with.

His actions on Earth? Everything was precipitated by the desires and actions of the Family.

Mikael, for all his ego and selfishness, never acted for himself. He used the Family as a handrail and a crutch, directing his actions.

Instead of becoming a Dragon of Freedom, travelling the multiverse on the adventures he had often dreamed of and talked about, Mikael became a sleeping Dragon of Life. Content to live, avoiding risks to himself and his Family so that the life he so craved and worked for, his Happy Ending, would never end.

Mikael, at his core, was a man filled with fear.

The same fear that led to his hatred of Mastering. The same fear ensured he did everything he could for his Family. The same fear kept him from fulfilling the potential Emma longed to see achieved.

The fear of losing himself. The loss of his identity as 'him'.

He never feared going crazy. He feared not being 'Mikael' anymore.

So he chained himself down so 'Mikael' would not float away. He chained himself with relationships, duty, love, and memories.

It was such a disgustingly romantic notion, so quintessentially 'Mikael' that Emma wanted to laugh in jubilation and cry in sorrow.

Instead, she dressed in the costume of the 'White Queen', bodyguard to Emma Frost, and left her room to meet her 'boss'.

It was time to confront another of her failures, to face the consequences of her actions.

"I don't care how much it costs," Frost said, her tone icy cold as she spoke into her phone. "I want that theatre built within the week! Pay triple the average rate if you have to! Quintuple! Call in Supers if you must. Get! It! Done!"

It was a cell phone, so the billionaire couldn't slam it down without breaking it, but she desperately looked like she wanted to.

Emma looked over her counterpart with a critical eye and didn't like what she saw.

Hair with a few strands out of place. Make up a bit too thick. Clothes that didn't match the decor or season.

On anyone else, it wouldn't have been noticeable. If it was, it would go without comment as the Emma Frost that sat behind her desk in her office still looked every part of the beautiful, professional CEO of one of the largest companies in the world.

To Emma? Frost looked like she was completely unravelling.

These minor blemishes to her appearance were outward indicators of a woman losing herself.

And it was Emma's fault.

Not everyone handled Heartbreak well.

"What did he say," Frost asked Emma eagerly as soon as she hung up the call, not even bothering to hide her emotions as usual. "Did he agree?"

"He did," Emma nodded, holding back the sigh at the lack of the woman's usual elegant demeanour. She, unlike this… failure, could control herself. "He'll talk to Priscilla about it later and decide on a date. You will, however, meet with them during the upcoming Super Fan Convention for an interview with her if there are no issues. To announce the date and talk. It will be the best time to tie you to us, but what happens after that will be up to your own efforts."

“Excellent.” Frost stood from her desk and hurriedly walked to the bedroom connected to the office and into the enormous clothes closet. “Help me pick out an outfit. Something appropriate for the occasion that fits his tastes.”

A part of Emma wanted to end this charade now. The original plan was to use Frost as proof that Mikael was wrong about the women of his Family. Not only could ‘Emma Frost’ fall in love with him, but he too could come to love her without fearing his Love tainting it.

In doing that, she hoped he would let go of his fear of himself.

If Emma Frost, the one of the original ten summoned least likely to fall in love with him, did so, there was no reason why he needed to fear his influence on her was the reason she felt the way she did. There was no reason to fear his existence would warp those around him.

That original plan had fallen to the wayside as soon as Emma had used her Command Seal-enhanced Semblance, and now she was looking at the consequence of her choice.

“Mikael likes two things more than anything else in a woman,” she explained. To anyone who knew their situation, Frost’s intentions were pathetically transparent. That it was only after Heartbreak that Frost even asked this question was proof enough of Emma’s failure. “Competence and engagement. He has certain preferences for body type and clothes, but you don’t need to worry about that in this situation. I am proof he finds you attractive. No, you need to focus on fulfilling those two requirements. Or you will fail.”

“I will assume you do not speak about romantic engagement with another.” Frost frowned at a dress, shook her head, and put it back on the rack. Emma agreed. It was much too formal for a convention that was a glorified PR move.

“I mean intellectual engagement. You have to be able to keep up with him in conversation. He tolerates slow people. He will never like one. Mikael won’t suddenly start talking about advanced nanotechnology like Richards or Stark, but his mind works fast. He will lose interest if you cannot keep up with quick changes in topics or digressions.”

“Will it be a problem that I know nothing about his hobbies?” Frost asked as she threw a pair of shorts over her shoulder in disgust. Much too casual.

Not even two weeks ago, Emma urged Frost to take this much more seriously, and the other woman went along with it to gain benefits. Now, the situation was completely reversed.

If only Emma could be happy about it.

“No,” Emma denied. “If you are interested in them, he will talk your ear off, but if you are only faking it, he can tell, and you will lose respect instead. Do not worry about any of that. What you need to do is show competence while you work together. He will be more

impressed with your ability to set up the venue, events, and show than any flattery or ego-stroking. You need to bring something to the table for him to notice you. He is like us in that way."

Emma had to fight down the shiver of disgust at using the term 'us.'

"I do not wish for a professional relationship with him," Frost frowned at the White Queen as she set a white blouse to the side as a possibility. "I am trying to join the Family."

Funny, Emma thought caustically. You seemed perfectly happy to only use my existence to get the Elden Lord on your side until you felt my Semblance.

She didn't say anything about that and, through long practice, hid her disgust at the woman before her.

"I know that," she said instead. "He knows that. The entire Family knows that. You are not trying to seduce a man. You are proving that you fit in with him and thirteen other women."

"Will they be a problem," Frost asked with a frown. "Would it not be better to have kept our plan a secret from them?"

"A piece of advice," Emma couldn't resist the small dose of snark that filled her voice. "Never, and I cannot stress this enough, ever try and manipulate or mislead him. Even if you could succeed, which you can't, he will find out eventually. And he will kill you for it."

Emma pretended the visible shiver of her counterpart was from fear, not arousal.

"But to answer your question, no. They will not be a problem if you do not try to get between him and them. They have absolute trust in him to be loyal. And for good reason. Mikael will never, ever cheat. This means if you want to be with him and be part of the Family, you also need their approval. They don't have to love you, and you do not have to love them, but you need them to accept you, and you accept them."

"So what is the plan?" Frost asked, disrobing and trying on a blouse and skirt combo.

"The best way to not only attain but retain his interest is through showing competence in your handling of Priscilla's music career. You show usefulness and learn to get along with her as you work together. Not only will this bring you into contact with Mikael more, but Priscilla is the baby of the Family. Getting in her good graces will go a long way to gaining approval from the others. This is something that will take time to happen. It might take years. You will have to work for this."

"I will, but I need more information. And will this outfit work?"

"Do not worry about your clothes for now," Emma finally said, fed up with the useless woman's dithering. "I have an outfit that I know will push his buttons and is appropriate

for the occasion. Before anything else, we need to ensure the event goes off without a hitch. Give me the status of everything so far since the Endbringer attack."

Frost frowned but nodded and gave Emma a detailed breakdown of the current situation, with the venue, recording label, fundraiser status, and possible show dates. She even shared details on her company's financial position after last week's devastation.

After that, Emma reviewed what she felt her counterpart needed to know to not screw their entire plan over when she met Mikael again. Already, they were working their way up from rock bottom after the less-than-impressive showing Frost gave during the gala.

Mikael had seen right through her, knowing Frost was just using Emma to get to him to get to the power and influence he could bring her. Just because Frost's desires had changed after Heartbreak didn't mean Mikael had forgotten his first impression of the woman.

Through it all, Emma was careful not to give out any actual secrets of the Family for fear that the 'Oppressor' was behind the mutant's new passion to join the Family. Without Mikael, Emma could not get past her counterpart's mental barriers undetected and check for mental influence.

In some twisted way, Emma actually hoped Frost's fervent wish to suddenly be with Mikael was born out of some shadowy mastermind's plot.

Emma's Semblance was powerful, sure, especially with a Command Seal backing it up. But it was absolutely nothing compared to what she had actually felt in Mikael's mind.

Emma was simply too… small, inconsequential, sane, human, and weak to convey the depth of what she experienced there.

After all, for all the trauma Heartbreak caused, nobody had actually gone *mad* from it.

So, what did it mean for Emma if a mere fraction of what she went through was enough to drive a woman she hated, the mirror of her past self, to *this*?

Did it mean Mikael was right to fear himself?

Did it mean Emma truly was a shackle on the neck of the man she loved?

Author's Note:

A big thanks to Old Man of the Mountain for helping me edit this one.

Emma is such a dichotomy of characteristics. In comics and in this fic. On the one hand, is the power-driven, control-obsessed narcissist. On the other hand, she is the woman who did everything she could for mutants, her students, and her husband. Writing her is incredible fun, and I am really looking forward to my plans for her.

Luthor is also enjoyable to write. Too often, he is reduced to a villain stereotype, the quintessential evil genius. Much of his characterization is almost two-dimensional, as with many characters that originated in early comics. Superman good. Luthor bad. It's virtually Wiley Coyote levels of cartoon villainy.

I wanted to write something where this genius is not defined by the boy in blue. He still has the same characteristics as the same character, but the world forces him to accept his own insignificance before creatures like Galactus. Superman couldn't be his priority in that situation. We know Superman's power level, but visually, the Boy Scout does not compare to a being who eats planets. Especially not when he was young. Slight differences in the past lead to significant differences in the present.

Finally, I wanted to correct some misunderstandings about this fic. It is something I've stated before, but I will repeat it again:

I know how this story ends. This is not a fic designed to go on forever. Volume 3 will be the last. I will only ever publish something if I have an ending in mind.

This fic is not a comic book. It's not something like Dragon Ball, either. It is not one of those world-hopping WC fics where the protagonists face ever-increasing and absurd stakes to maintain engagement. I have had a list of actors, characters that have been around from the start, and a story that might only make complete sense when it is done. At pure threat level, it isn't even linear escalation. Trigon is a more significant threat than the Council of Skyfathers and Endbringers any day of the week. The difference is that one was planned for, and the other was sprung on our protagonists.

I have always been more engaged with villains that had plans, thought ahead, and remained unknown until the right time. Someone who can be defeated by punching them hard is not an engaging villain. They aren't even a real threat. I am hoping that comes across in this story by the end.

Rapturous Rhapsody will not be the best story ever told, but it will be mine. One I want to read when it is done and look at it and say, with pride, 'I wrote that.'

I cannot control if you like my work. All I can control is the story I tell, and hope you do

like it.

I will see you all next week.

CONSEQUENCES III

"A mountain is composed of tiny grains of Earth. The ocean is made up of tiny drops of water. Even so, life is but an endless series of little details, actions, speeches, and thoughts. And the consequences, whether good or bad, of even the least of them are far-reaching."
- Swami Sivananda

"Out of all the heroes in this world, you are the one I like the best. You are like me."

Batman returned to his man cave, his mind fluttering through a dozen subjects. Tonight's fight with Killer Croc, Joker's recent disappearance, the changes in Gotham after Heartbreak, or probable candidates for Tohu's plans when it had appeared.

He ignored his bruises as he stowed his gear, input the information he had gathered on Gotham and its infamous residents, and asked Alfred to get him a cup of coffee.

"And how long will you be up today, Master Bruce?" Alfred asked as he prepared the requested drink and a full breakfast.

The billionaire watched his butler, oldest friend, confidant, and father figure work as he went through martial arts forms to stretch his muscles after a long, gruelling night of patrolling the streets.

Alfred looked good.

Better than Bruce had seen in years.

He wasn't younger, per se, but he moved with the fluid grace he had in Bruce's youth rather than the slow, deliberate motions of recent times. The old man had kept himself in shape and healthy as he aged, but there were little things that inevitably crop up as one aged. Joint pains, muscles not responding properly, cellular deterioration, or the simple loss of energy one has in their youth.

All gone now, thanks to the Elden Lord.

It was a bright day. Blue skies with white, fluffy clouds. An ideal day in Gotham, one of the safest cities in the world. A perfect day for a wedding.

"A few hours," Bruce answered as he twisted his body slowly. Proper form was more important than speed; the slower he moved, the more his body stretched. "League business."

"And Miss Kyle?" Alfred asked, a note of chastisement in his voice.

"Let her sleep in," Bruce answered. "Our date tonight is still on if she asks."

"Very well, Master Bruce," Alfred nodded at him with pleasure. "I am most pleased you are taking this time with her. The Batman might be needed, but losing sight of what

he works towards would be worse than losing him."

Batman grunted. Alfred must be in an excellent mood if he was nagging him. He knew what he fought for.

His parents watched from the front row, smiles of pride and love on their faces. Clark, Dick, and Jason stood by him at the altar. Colleagues, heroes and not, watched the proceedings silently, knowing the world was safe. That they weren't needed. Batman didn't see any of that. All Bruce saw were two blue eyes as he whispered two words.

I do.

Accepting the coffee and the meal, Batman got back to work.

While he had been out, Stark had reached out. Launch for the last pieces of the base had passed without issue. All that was left was to assemble it, through the liberal use of drones, and furnish it.

Batman also checked on the status of active league members. Most US-based ones were at their places of residence, it being very early in the morning in North America. There were a slew of reports that he went through with a fine tooth comb.

A new villain in Bergen, Norway. Designation: Discombobulator. Main power: a low-grade psychic/Master focused on disorientation rather than control. Power source: Mutant. J'ohn had dealt with her handily.

Heroine in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Designation: Succour. Master with a focus on emotions. Calming them and instilling a feeling of 'peace and acceptance.' Power source: Trigger. Currently providing aid in the wake of Khonsu's attack on La Pyramide.

Hero in Sana, Yemen. Designation: Alhazr. Main power: Master area control by creating overwhelming fear and trepidation as one neared the center. Power source: Trigger.

Rogue in Ocho Rio, Jamaica.

Villain in Seattle, US.

Villain.

Villain.

Hero. Villain. Rogue. Rogue. Rogue. Hero. Villain. Villain.

Batman frowned as he looked over the data and reports. Some came from league members, others from governmental entities, some were compared from Dragon's logs, and a surprising amount came from various internet sources that were quintuple-checked against each other for consistency.

It all depicted the Earth's current stability and critical issues.

It was a picture Batman wasn't happy to see, though that was hardly new.

In the wake of any disaster, especially Endbringer attacks, the number of new Supers

rose. Whether from stress triggering the x-gene in mutants, opportunists getting their hands on tech or DNA they shouldn't have, or simple Triggers, surges in the Super population were expected and predicted in Batman's calculation.

The number of powered individuals continuously increased, and disasters saw that number spike in proportion to various factors. News coverage, number of the dead, cultural significance of the targeted area, and the heroes who died in the incident. All had been fed into his model, and Batman had been able to reliably predict the growth of the super population for the last few years.

But his prediction was off. Not by a little, either. It was a margin of error large enough to be worrying.

The Elden Lord and his Family had thrown a spanner into every predictive model. That was an unavoidable fact. Was this rise in Supers another effect of his presence?

That would explain the higher-than-normal proportion of Supers with Master and psychic-based powers.

The Supers that had emerged from Beijing's populous tended to have geokinetic or movement-based powers. In most cases, powers appeared to 'deal' with the person's situation.

It was probable that Heartbreak was the source of this outlying rise in Supers.

There was no fear. There was only Love and Family.

But could that account for all of them?

Before the Elden Lord's arrival, Batman's initial model predicted that the Super population would outnumber non-Supers by 2050. Even if he were to account for all the new Endbringers and the potential disasters they could bring, his most generous prediction placed that event horizon at 2045.

Now?

Supers would be the majority within the decade.

That was even accounting for the fact that the surge in powers would fall as a new status quo fell. As a rule of thumb, only one in three people with powers used it in day-to-day life. This was either because their power was so minor or useless that there was no reason to use it.

That, or they didn't want to risk their lives as heroes, villains or independents.

When given power, the vast majority of people did not use it to change the world. They would make their daily life more comfortable or convenient.

And Batman's model accounted for that.

So, where was the disconnect? Obviously, it had something to do with the Elden Lord, as he was the new variable, but Mikael did not give people powers. Everything Bruce knew

about the man indicated he would prefer to horde power rather than grant it. Was he accidentally spreading it? Did his healing of the world cause a higher chance of developing abilities in the recipients?

As Batman went over the data repeatedly, trying to find the missing link, he received a report from Weather Witch. One of the few Justice League members based in China, she was alerting him to a possible tool for the League.

Batman gave it a brief overview.

A healing agent, it seemed.

One was released worldwide by Essex Corp in the wake of Heartbreak as a universal panacea. The Elden Lord had healed everyone, spoiling them from making the maximum profit they probably anticipated. Still, millions were injured afterward in the fighting and the following disasters.

A perfect time to make money with medicine, the long-ignored business part of Bruce's brain acknowledged.

Batman knew of the company that specialized in genetics and DNA research. It then sold said research to the highest bidders to fund more research in a profit-generating cycle.

They had been among the first to discover the X-gene and distinguish between Mutants and the Triggered. Very rarely did they release a product to the public. For them to have something like this ready for shipment immediately meant it had been prepared for a while, and they were waiting for the best time to release it.

The next Endbringer attack, probably.

According to the information Weather Witch sent and Batman's research to verify, it was a liquid medicine administered by injection vials, not too dissimilar to injecting insulin to diabetic patients. Purchasable for home use or used with an IV.

It accelerated body healing, especially in recent injuries. It did less for long-held wounds, but nobody had those any more thanks to the Elden Lord. Nicknamed 'Sanguine' due to its red colour, it had passed FDA approval last month.

Before introducing it as a supply to League members, Batman would do his own tests to ensure no side effects. If this healing agent did as advertised without drawbacks, it would help the world immensely.

Supplies were limited, and most of the product was sent to the devastated parts of the world, but a part of Bruce admired the fact that it was priced so cheaply. Essex Corp. was doing a good thing by keeping the price affordable for those afflicted by tragedy.

It wasn't only out of the kindness of their hearts, of course, as word of mouth would spread. As production ramped up and more supply became available, they could leverage users' accounts to ensure it would pass regulations in stricter countries more easily.

For a moment, just a moment, Batman thought about diving more deeply into this ‘Sanguine’ despite how busy he was.

But no, he shook the thought off. It wasn’t important.

What was important was finding the source of the rise in Supers and keeping tabs on the Elden Lord’s next move.

Could someone be selling powers? It wouldn’t be the first time. But the numbers here, in such a short amount of time, made that unlikely. Or was it a byproduct of the tragedy Batman couldn’t have predicted but was simply a coincidence?

In the absolute privacy of his Bat Cave, Bruce Wayne snorted the tiniest of chuckles to himself.

Batman didn’t believe in coincidences.

But for now, Batman was at a dead end with the data he had on that subject and would investigate it more later.

So what was the Elden Lord and his Family up to now?

Maybe Bruce was like the Elden Lord in some small way, but that didn’t mean he would let Mikael and his Family operate without what little oversight he could have. Every move of theirs had ramifications, so keeping tabs was just common sense.

That was easier than ever since the Heartbreak. The Family had been working with heroes instead of acting independently in recovery efforts. That, more than any interview Mikael gave, told of their dedication towards Earth and it’s inhabitants.

So Batman went through his checklist.

Glynda Goodwitch was in Nepal repairing the damage Khonsu did in one of its teleports. She used her extremely fine control of telekinesis to help repair damaged cities, usually with a well known hero accompanying her so the populace did not panic. But some things could not be fixed, even with the dragon’s almost omniscient control of her surroundings. Anything vaporized to dust, burned, or transformed into an unrecognizable state was beyond her.

That was where Tsunade Senju came in.

Of the Family, the chlorokinetic had been the greatest boon to the world excepting the Elden Lord himself.

Not only was she a premier healer, only beat by Panacea, but she could clone herself to be in multiple places at once. This allowed her to work in numerous disaster areas without giving off the impression of playing favourites, as the US was often accused of doing. A valid concern in this time of international tension. She could help with food, housing, and healing. The Female Titan, as some internet dwellers had started calling her for some reason, was practically tailor made for disaster relief.

The current report indicated she was focusing on healing farming land damaged by Endbringer attacks after providing housing and food for refugees.

While Earth had been surviving and repelling Endbringers, they had lost ground. Literally. Captain Atom could absorb radiation from areas affected by Behemoth's nuclear fallout, but the land would still be barren. Saltwater from Leviathan's attacks would be even more ruinous to farmland.

There was no obvious testament to the Endbringer's lack of desire to see humanity wiped out than the fact that they focused on population centers rather than food production areas. If every one of their attacks went to various bread baskets of the world, humanity would have already torn themselves apart over the scraps.

A few Super fertilizers or chemical compounds from Reed Richards or another Super genius' had helped reclaim some lost territory. Still, exotic materials in their creation meant they could not be brought to the large scale.

It was nothing compared to the effect of having Tsunade sit cross legged in the middle of barren fields for a few hours and watching miles and miles of plant life spring up around her.

It was a haunting reminder to Batman about what Poison Ivy could have been had she taken a better path.

After checking up on the two most useful Family members in the relief efforts, Batman checked on the others. Medea continued to use magic to hollow out the 'mountain' Bohu had made, and Glynda deposited away from Beijing.

It would be a few weeks, even with a witch of her level, before the project was finished, but when it was, it would act as a livable city for the millions of refugees in the area. Beijing was uninhabitable now, too twisted and unstable for civilians to remain safe. Not even Glynda Goodwitch could put it back as it was, thanks to the large area and complexity of the task.

There had been some push back against Medea's construction, as her workforce were essentially skeletons, and human bones had a negative connotation in Chinese culture. In the end, it was the fact they were draconian and not human remains, as well as the desperation of the people, that had pushed the dissatisfied populous to accept living in a 'cursed' city.

Those three were the dragons active in rebuilding, but other members of the Family were engaged in their own specialized fields.

Namely, violence.

Both versions of Wonder Woman were in the Balkans, chasing down a terrorist cell that had almost succeeded in setting off a nuclear explosion in the middle of a city. Their

budding friendship had cooled somewhat, Bruce knew, after his friend found out her father was Zeus. She had been told she had been crafted from clay for most of her life.

That her father was partially responsible for the death and destruction of Themiscyra and that her dimensional counterpart's husband killed said father and took in her mother and surviving 'sisters' sent her on a bit of a loop. Her sister, Donna, had decided to join the PRT and the Teen Titans rather than join the rest of the Amazons on the Island, so Diana wasn't completely cut off from her family.

Needless to say, the relationship between both women had become a bit more complicated. As far as Batman could tell, they were still friends, but the two versions of the same woman had come to acknowledge the differences in their experiences and priorities after Heartbreak.

Turning from the Wonder Women, Batman took note of the locations and actions of the other consorts he could track.

Priscilla was streaming again. Some fighting game Batman wasn't familiar with, but he had never kept track of that sort of thing. No matter how scantily clad the women depicted seemed to be.

Artoria Pendragon was still operating as a neutral third party overseeing the negotiations between the two Mongolian factions in their civil war.

Batman was genuinely impressed by the female version of King Arthur. She had been charismatic when they met, but seeing her work in diplomacy was always a marvel. Maybe this was what some historical accounts meant when people talked about a 'born ruler.'

On the complete opposite side of the spectrum was Scathach. Of the consorts that were geopolitically active, she was the hardest to track. Any of them could disappear at the drop of a hat, but the Celt was wildly chaotic. She did good work, though.

In the last week alone, she had taken down almost a hundred Supers that had started making trouble worldwide. It was like she heard about some situation somewhere, ran to wherever that was, and hunted down the offender.

Then Scathach would openly challenge them to a fight.

While Batman wasn't thrilled with how lethal those fights could get, he recognized he had no jurisdiction over the spearwoman. Scathach didn't officially have jurisdiction either, but very few people were brave enough to point that out to her face. On top of that, most governments or powers in the areas she visited tended to appreciate a Super dealing with their headaches without needing payment.

In the end, it was the fact that Scathach always offered and honoured her opponents a chance to surrender that stopped Batman from taking any action. After only a week, most

villains who saw her coming surrendered without a fight.

To Scathach's vocal displeasure.

Apparently, she didn't approve of those who started trouble without being willing to put their lives on the line.

Batman disagreed with her on the subject, but he could appreciate the reputation she had built and how she used it to keep global peace.

Right now, the Celt was dragging four teenage boys to British authorities with a frown on her face. Batman didn't smile as he reviewed the footage a civilian with a phone had taken, but it was close.

Apparently, all four boys had been a cluster trigger, their powers being the ability to merge together and get exponentially stonger, faster, and more durable with each of them connected. A power that could be very useful in the right circumstances.

What did they do with it?

Go on a rampage around Edinburough. They did this just to attract the attention of Scathach. Once she arrived, they unmerged, got down on one knee together, and asked her to marry all four of them.

Needless to say, the Celt had been unimpressed. Scathach hadn't killed them, but even Batman thought they might have preferred it if she did. None of them would be walking for months and might never be able to have children again.

Leaving that amusing situation to sort itself out, Batman tried to find any hint about the location of the rest of the Family with no success.

Melina, Nico Robin, Ranni, Yoruichi, or Raven could be at home on the Island or anywhere else in the world, which was always unsatisfying for the Dark Knight. Seven out of twelve was actually a good number for the Family, as they came and went where they pleased, but the Caped Crusader was a completionist.

Batman wasn't following the consorts out of some paranoia driven stalking. It was to try and find Mikael.

It was an unequivocal fact that if you wanted to keep track of the Elden Lord and any plans he had, you needed to know where his wives were.

Mikael never did anything alone.

If Batman wanted to predict his next step after Heartbreak, he needed to try and identify which of his wives he was spending time with and for what reason.

It was a good theory, one that worked in most cases, except for the fact that one of the consorts could be with him at all times.

A ping on Batman's searching algorithm had him pull up the camera feed from a street light in Manhattan. Rewinding, Batman saw the Elden Lord emerge from shadows in

an alley. By now, it was around nine in the morning as Batman worked through the morning, and the streets were busy.

Not that Mikael cared.

Openly, he walked into the Baxter Building as if he was just another tourist.

Why would he be going there? Did he have some business with the Richards family?

The Fantastic Four had been retired for years, so why was he going there today? Bruce did remember Mikael speaking to and shaking hands with Reed right before the sirens went off. Could they have set up a meeting?

Something to ask the reclusive inventor later.

With the knowledge that he now had a lead on whatever new absurdity Mikael would come up with, Batman started to wrap up his work. He made notes on various cases he was working on, chronicled patrols and patterns, and cleaned up and organized his files before bed.

Even he needed a few hours of sleep to operate at maximum efficiency, and he did have a date later.

Bruce had almost finished his housekeeping when he received a message.

One he had been waiting months for.

Captain Marvel had been in space, chasing down leads on the Elden Lord's past and acting as a scout for potential spaceborne threats.

Her message was short and shocking.

Batman mentally apologized to Selina as he read the first five words the heroine sent.

'The Phoenix is coming back.'

It looked like he would miss their date after all.

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I whistled to myself as I emerged from the shadows of a dumpster in Manhattan.

My teleportation was superior, but I needed to precisely know my destination. Raven's was better for the first time I teleported to new places.

New places like one of the most famous buildings in this world that I entered along with a crowd of tourists.

The Baxter Building was as much a home for one of the first Super teams as it was a monument to the advent of the modern Super era, the pamphlet I picked up told me.

It was 35 stories tall and maintained a sense of classical design amongst the sky

scrapers of steel and glass that dominated much of the surrounding area. The top ten stories were all occupied as headquarters and housing for the Fantastic Four, even if they were in retirement.

The FF owned the entire building, as one of the first things they had done upon retiring was to purchase from the landlord. Still, they only expanded their living space to the top ten floors and left the rest of the building to act as a museum/gallery/convention center.

I, of course, did the whole tourist thing.

I stood in line for the exhibits of the Fantastic Four's early days, the fateful trip to the space station, and their emergence as a team. I walked through the halls, reading little murals and leaflets beside the trophies of their battles with villains. I doubted they would allow authentic Skrul weaponry to the public, but it was still an excellent replica.

I ate at the overpriced cafe. A Clobberin' Club sandwich and an Invisible Chai latte. I didn't know what made it invisible, but it was a good chai. I finished it off with a Human Torchcicle. Orange flavoured.

Some people might have recognized me. The only 'disguise' I had was a minor illusion over my eyes since they were my most distinctive feature. Without them, people's own brains would do the rest. The idea that I would be there was a tad absurd, after all.

The Elden Lord, miracle worker, husband to twelve (that they knew) wives, Heartbreaker, Super of Supers, and generally busy guy wouldn't waste time taking selfies with a statue of Galactus.

Which I definitely did.

I even had someone else take the photo while I pretended to bite the apple-sized planet Earth in the statue's hand. Her bafflement was visible as she struggled to decide whether I was the Elden Lord or someone who looked like him.

It was an enjoyable time. Just loosing myself in the early morning crowd. A true introvert can be alone, even surrounded by hundreds of people.

Raven was here with me, but we were both introverts, so the point still counted. Especially since we spent hours together without sharing a word. She hadn't wanted to deal with the crowd.

I appreciated her giving me this time.

The entire Family knew about my plans tonight with Tsunade, so a few hours to ground myself in the 'real world' away from the Family was needed.

I was surprised this museum was so busy, to be honest. It had only been a little over a week since Heartbreak. This was the first day the 'museum' was open after the Endbringer attack, but it was still packed more than I expected.

Maybe the people of this world were just so used to disaster that they bounced back relatively quickly? Even if this disaster was more extensive than most.

While browsing the gift shop and contemplating if Torrent or Medea would like a stuffed Thing, I finally saw a 'polite' way of getting to the entire reason I was here.

Before proceeding, I got Torrent a Mr. Fantastic blanket that stretched and Medea some 'Mole Man Macaroons.'

With my purchases magically stored because luggage is for chumps, I casually stalked a bunch of school children.

… I admit nothing, Mr. FBI agent.

"…after lunch, we will watch a show on the ninth floor," Susan Storm led a gaggle of, I want to say nine year olds? I am terrible at guessing children's ages. Their actual teachers followed behind the star struck kids, making sure nobody was getting lost in the crowd. "Its made with the footage we captured while working with Shi'ar. There are no space battles," the kids 'aww'ed in disappointment, "but you will see other planets and aliens. Real ones, not like a movie."

Like little ducklings following a mother duck, the tour group left the main lobby and entered the first part of the exhibit.

I, as the apex predator I was, followed without being noticed.

… I swear, Mr. FBI agent, I am entirely innocent.

I followed them for about five minutes, keeping my distance to not ruin their little class tour.

I was all for ruining people's day, even children's, but there is a special place in the Kiln of the First Flame reserved for people who ruin school field trips.

My chance came when the fantastic Invisible Woman stepped back and let the teachers coral their students to take turns exploring the interior of the fake spacecraft, modelled after the first one the FF used.

See, Mr. FBI agent, I am not after children. I am after the MILFs that usually have children.

… Maybe spending too long alone and not speaking aloud was bad for the stability of my mental thoughts?

Nah.

"We haven't been introduced," I said, stepping forward and offering my hand to the woman. "Mikael. I met your husband and daughter a week ago, and they asked me to stop by."

If the heroine was surprised to see me, she didn't show it.

"Susan," she said with a smile as she shook my hand. "They told me you might drop

in. We were expecting you upstairs, not down here."

"I don't follow many rules, but teleporting into people's homes is kind of rude," I sighed internally as I dropped her hand.

Susan Storm was a beautiful woman. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and a body to die for. If someone pointed her out in a crowd and tried to convince me she had given birth to two children, I would refuse to believe them.

Partly because she was super hot and partly because it wasn't true.

This was not Susan Storm, but another robot like the fake Reed Richards from the party.

They weren't alive, unlike a true AI, but simply fake bodies doing things they were programed to. It was a super complicated program I would only understand with years of study, even with my Talents.

I was smart, but I wasn't super genius territory. As a Dragon of Life, all I knew was that these things did not count as 'life.'

I didn't act on this knowledge yet. Today's meeting was only the last of the loose ends, and the most suspicious one, that I needed to deal with to gather more information on this nebulous 'Enemy/Oppressor' that had the gods and Parliaments up in arms.

"I am busy here," the fake heroine gestured to the children and teachers. A few gave us odd looks as the robot slipped a metal card into my hand. "But slide this card into the elevator, and you can go right up."

"Thanks," I said simply.

No point in being extra polite to a glorified toaster.

I have a deep and abiding respect and fondness for cyborgs, gynoids, AI, or any technological based life form that could think for itself. But something that couldn't, that had no capacity to create and grow, was little more than a walking computer. If they became alive through emergent properties or overcoming their programming, all the better.

But until then, I wasn't going to get turned on by the robot equivalent of a blow-up doll.

I waved goodbye at the excited children, some pointing at me and shouting, as I contemplated mankind's quest for robussy.

It was a quest I wholeheartedly supported, as robot waifus were still waifus, I just regretted that too many people forgot that a 'waifu' needed to be able to think for itself and make decisions for it to matter.

Otherwise, you might as well try and romance a cardboard cutout. This was the same for all waifus or husbandos, if you swung that way.

If there wasn't a chase, a chance of failure or conflict, then any romance would be boring.

Ah well. I wasn't shopping around for more wives. Otherwise, I would consider proving those tabloids right about Dragon and me.

That did leave me with a question.

Would 'freeing' the Canadian AI lead to all her limiters coming off or just the ones I intended? Would I be responsible for unleashing maple syrup flavored Ultron on the world? Is snowy Skynet a good thing?

When I stepped into the elevator designed for the Fantastic Four's use, I decided I could live with giving the world it's AI ordered free healthcare.

As soon as the door closed behind me, I felt the air in the elevator change as the oxygen was drained out of it.

I raised an eyebrow as new air flowed in, and I started to ascend.

That was… extreme.

The headquarters of the Fantastic Four was a fortress, I knew. All entrances could act as airlocks, every window's glass was thick enough to bounce missiles off, and dozens of different force fields surrounded the building. I wouldn't be surprised if Strange or other sorcerers had set up magical defences, either.

One of the reasons I had not simply flown through the walls, ignoring all defences, was because I wasn't confident the entire building wouldn't teleport itself into a pocket dimension or something equally absurd. Since I wasn't trying to attack the place but visiting to talk, setting off a mini armageddon didn't seem like a good idea.

In the early years after the Fantastic Four retired, some of their old enemies had tried their hand at attacking, under the assumption the heroes had gotten weak. Only a few had made it past the third floor, let alone all the way up to the living quarters or Reed's lab.

And then Doom had decided to make examples out of those who tried to invade his rival's home.

I don't know what deal the Fantastic Four had made with their old nemesis or if it had simply been his ego that compelled the king of Latveria to do what he did. Still, after the first year and the public execution of Mole Man, nobody tried to attack the Baxter Building again.

Of course, the Fantastic Four decried the act, and there was no overt connection to link the Mole Man's 'invasion' of Latveria and the largest attack on the Baxter Building. Still, anyone with a brain knew Doom was making an example.

If Victor Von Doom did not defeat the Fantastic Four, nobody else could.

I emerged from the elevator to see the scariest sight known to man.

A little girl smiling.

“You’re here,” Valeria Richards cheered with a broad smile. She pressed a button on the remote she held in her hand, and the armoury of weapons pointing at the elevator receded back into the walls. “I was worried you were never going to come.”

I recognized guns, lasers, and some sort of plasma weapon. I had no idea about the other ninety percent of the things pointed at me in the few seconds before they dissapered.

“How do you know I am me,” I asked casually as I looked around the room. It was a vast and bare hallway with smooth metal walls. There was no hint that this place had more weapons than the US military. As a collector of weapons myself, I approved. “There are shapshifters and other Strangers around. I could be someone pretending to be this handsome. If I were someone else, I would want to be me.”

“You’re the Elden Lord,” Valeria said with absolute certainty, her blonde hair bobbing as she nodded. She turned, walking down the hallway, which was way to long to actually be confined to the actual space of the building. “Your Family are the only life forms known to show up on camera and yet give off no other observable effect. No radiation, gravitational pull, energy readings, or psychic imprint. My scanners would still pick up an illusion or other fake image.”

Looking for an absence rather than a presence of something? Man, the Defences were helpful, but they were not absolute. At least not in front of intelligent people who knew workarounds. It wouldn’t do anything if I turned invisible, but it was another hole to be aware of.

But getting flexed on by a pre-teen wasn’t why I was here.

“If you knew I was here, why did I have to find your mom-bot to get invited up?” I asked as I followed the super genius.

“You looked like you were having fun,” the little girl shrugged with a giggle.

“Fair enough,” I shrugged. “So… Saving the world? Not my usual cup of tea, even if I dabble here and there.”

“Right,” Valeria said, her smile shrinking slightly. It didn’t disappear completely, but it was smaller. We finally reached the stairs and started to climb. “I don’t know where to start. I don’t get a lot of company I can actually talk to.”

“Why don’t you start with the robot family you have going on?” I asked.

We were now on a floor with very narrow, tight hallways. They turned sharply at angles, twisted in loops that somehow reversed on themselves, and, at one point, became an entire Mobius strip.

Valeria continued to lead me easily through this maze.

“It’s so nobody catches on that I am the only one that’s real,” Valeria waived off my

question as obvious. “A little girl needs her parents. There’d be investigations and curious people if Uncle Johnny stopped clubbing, Mom doesn’t do some charity work or take Franklin out, or Uncle Doom isn’t ruling his country. Dad and Uncle Ben are the easiest. They didn’t ever like being in public. Nobody notices if they only show up once or twice a year.”

I filed away the fact that the Doom running Latveria was a robot a twelve-year-old controlled for future jokes. Did this mean that Valeria was responsible for Doom’s actions for years?

I ignored the moral and philosophical implications of that and asked the first question I had upon touching the fake Reed’s hand at the Gala.

“Are they dead?”

The little girl leading me skipped a step.

I don’t mean she stumbled, but that she actually started skipping.

“Yes!” She cheered happily as if reporting a great triumph. “And no!”

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically. “That clears so much up. I understand everything now.”

“I’ll show you in a bit,” the most intelligent girl in the world told me as we emerged from the psychedelic maze onto a ledge overlooking a… pit?

I was an eldritch abomination from beyond time and space, and even I thought this was a bit much.

Valeria walked off the edge, falling into the dark pit.

With a shrug, I did the same.

We fell for twelve seconds, air passing by us as we gained speed. I saw ridges along the pit’s walls, possibly emplacements for more weapons.

Then we were standing in a living room.

It wasn’t teleportation, or I would have been able to resist it. One part of space ended, and another began. It was a mini wormhole.

Fucking comic bullshit, man.

“Val!” A young voice greeted us. “You’re back already? You’re too soon. I’m still trying to get Zapdos, and Moltress and Mew.”

The room we were in was a cozy space, with a large TV against one wall and long couches in a square around it. On one of those couches, a fifteen year old boy was playing with an old gameboy while lying upside down, his feet in the air and his hair brushing the ground.

“Good luck,” Valeria said casually as we walked by, not even looking at the boy. “If you haven’t caught all three by the time I’m back, you lose. You have an hour left. I’m going to introduce the dragon to everyone.”

“I don’t want a dragon type,” Franklin Richards said, returning to his game. “Everyone knows fairy types are better.”

“Dragon types are the best,” I muttered petulantly. “Tell me that’s another robot. Please? Any teenage boy who doesn’t think dragons are cool is obviously fake.”

“He is,” Valeria laughed. “We’re still in the ‘public’ part of the building.”

“The dungeon crawl we just went through is public?” I asked in disbelief.

“When family, friends, or heroes come over, they have to see something,” Valeria explained. “It also acts as a second layer of defence.”

“What was the first?”

“The museum. All the exhibits are actually various forms of security.”

“Neet. So it’s just a cover for a robot army and a way to make money?”

“That,” Valeria nodded, still smiling, but it took on a wistful tone. “And I didn’t want them to be forgotten.” For a second, I wondered if her perpetual cheer would fail, but then she shook her head with a laugh and continued. “The official story is that all five upper floors are now part of Dad’s lab, so this is the area I have people visit.”

“And the truth?”

“It’s home.”

Throughout this entire time, Valeria Richards had remained cheerful, with a smile, a skip in her step or a laugh in her voice. But when she said ‘home,’ the word came through the smile with a yearning, a fervent desire that burned from within.

More than anything else, I could understand that fire.

I didn’t say anything as she led me past the ‘gym’ where a robot version of Ben Grimm was running along an extra durable treadmill, past the ‘bedrooms’ where a robot Johnny Storm slept off a hangover, and past the ‘fake lab’ where a robot Reed Richards tinkered with some small device.

Was that the equivalent of a human trying to create a Frankenstein monster? Food for thought.

It was only because I was looking for it that I noticed the discrepancies.

Some rooms were messy, some were studiously clean, some saw a lot of use, and some were never used. This fake living area did not look fake, except for one thing.

It lacked chaos.

The messes were those deliberately left behind. Empty rooms were utterly empty. The gym’s equipment was clean, lacking the wear and tear from daily use when people dropped them or sweat-stained them. Little things like that indicate that no true life existed in this fake home.

Life was messy, chaotic, and prone to wastage and inefficiency.

This place would fool most people, maybe even me, if I didn't know what to look for, but it would not hold up under long term inspection.

"Are the robots your creation?" I asked as we entered another elevator hidden behind a fake wall. "How do you deal with their powers?"

"Elastic, super-dense, or non-flammable material. Mom's force fields are trickier. Thankfully, she never needs to use them publicly, but her invisibility is the easiest." Victoria explained, imputing a code in this new elevator. "Since they're not active heroes, they don't need to use them much. Uncle Doom had the basics already. I am just keeping their code current and ensuring they can react properly. My brother's is the hardest since I need to change it's appearance regularly."

"You were pretty friendly with it down stairs," I half asked. It was weird to me to engage with something 'unalive' as if it was. If it was undead, I could understand, as that was still 'alive,' but to talk to a toaster? "Some sort of bet?"

"I can't have an AI or other people here, so I entertain myself testing their programming," Valeria admitted with a giggle. "This will be the seventh time Franklin loses this bet. Using the abilities of an average human, it is theoretically possible to win against me, but statistically impossible. Also, they all have a psychic imprint of my real family overlaid on them to help it be more authentic, so I like pretending they can actually hear and understand me."

Well, that's depressing. Even if the little girl said it with a smile.

"If you can't have people here, why did you invite me?" I asked instead of commenting, continuing to follow behind her as we exited the elevator that went way too long to be in the Baxter Building.

If the area downstairs had been a curated living area, then this place was the real deal.

A copy of the same living room, buried under a mess of tools, electronics, notes, and inventions. The prototypical genius' messy workshop overlaid a family's living space. Nothing was visibly hazardous, no food or biological waste, but it was clear this place hadn't been cleaned in a while.

In the quagmire of MAD SCIENCE, only once spot was absolutely pristine.

A circle of clear space surrounded one wall covered in pictures. Dozens of photographs. Some showed the Fantastic Four in costume, sometimes with other heroes or in exotic locations. Others were pictures of Reed Richards and Susan Storm. On their wedding, their honeymoon, pregnant, at the birth of their first child, the second child. Baby Franklin and Valeria Richards.

It was a wall of memories, telling the story of a family through the years.

Downstairs was a museum to the Fantastic Four, the heroes, but this was a gallery to them as people.

Valeria gave the shrine a quick look as she walked through the pile of junk that littered the floor, carelessly stepping on pages of notes.

I was more careful, stepping on bare floor where possible as I followed.

“I invited you because you are the only one who can help.”

“Right, the saving the world thing. You never gave me an answer on that, by the way.”

“Years ago, my Uncle came back from a hell dimension,” Victoria explained as we navigated a mirror of the apartment below, only messier. “Long story. Anyway, he arrives back on Earth right after Behemoth’s first attack. He’s a powerful sorcerer and a genius, so he immediately notices something’s wrong with the heroes that fought the monster.”

“Sebuttu,” I nodded, following along.

“No,” Valeria shook her head, the paused, tilting her head. “Well, yes. Even I was under the Stranger Endbringer’s effect, so Uncle might have been too, but that’s not what he noticed. Tell me, have you noticed the rising population of Supers worldwide? Or is a large powered population normal for you?”

“There are a lot of worlds in the multiverse.” I shrugged. “It’s more common than you’d think. I can think of worlds where the ratio is eighty percent Super or at a similar level. But yes, I have noted the higher than average powered population on this Earth, compared to other versions of this world.”

“I’d love to pick your brain on the multiverse,” Valeria chirped, and I had an image of her trying to cut open my skull and poking my grey matter with a needle.

Ugh. Little girls. The worst.

“What did your Uncle notice,” I tried to steer the conversation back on track. “Just to be clear, we are talking about Doom here, right?”

“Right, so he’s reviewing the footage of the fight, making notes and countermeasures in case Behemoth attacks him,” Valeria rambled excitedly. “And he realizes that the Endbringer is sparing some heroes fighting it and killing others.”

“The Endbringers have never fought at full power,” I pointed out. “Their goal is to generate conflict, not kill everyone.”

“Obviously,” Valeria Richards rolled her eyes at me. “Anyone who didn’t notice that is an idiot. I meant that Behemoth specifically targeted certain heroes. Some it killed, but others he targeted for a bit then shifted to a new target, leaving them alive.”

“Was it forced to shift?” I asked, having given little study to the Endbringer’s various fights before I arrived. “Or was it deliberate?”

“Deliberate. Or that is what my Uncle thought.”

“Okay, so Doom does his best sleuthing about Behemoth. What did he find? And why am I the only one who can help with whatever it is?”

“He finds that the heroes affected are different, before and after Behemoth.”

“Different, how?”

Was this the elusive ‘Oppressor’ after all? I had expected it since I didn’t believe in coincidences, but I was ready to deal with someone else.

‘Saving the world’ was a day job on this planet.

“More brutal, higher rates of collateral damage, more prone to violence, and a greater efficiency as heroes,” Valeria explained. “In individual cases, it could be chalked up to growing more experienced, facing a life threatening situation, or other factors. But the same patterns repeating over dozens of heroes from different cultures or belief systems?”

“I’m pretty sure greater efficiency is a good thing,” I pointed out, playing devil’s advocate. “But I do agree consistent behaviour between heroes is odd. What did Doom do?”

“He gathered more data,” Valeria said with another eye roll, again treating the question as if the answer should be obvious. “When Behemoth appeared three months later and attacked New York, he observed and documented. The same pattern but different heroes. And those who fought in the first battle had higher survival rates as the Endbringer targeted others.”

God, save me from the attitude of pre teen girls, please Dragon-Me?

“What pattern?” I asked instead of smacking the girl on the head.

“Firstly, the more empathetic a hero was, the less likely they were to be targeted,” Valeria said, holding four fingers up and lowering them one by one as she spoke. “This means ‘kinder’ or heroes most concerned with civilians were safer than those who focused on defeating the Endbringer.”

“That seems like proper threat priority to me,” I pointed out, continuing to play the devil’s advocate.

“Secondly,” the sassy small child continued, holding her remaining fingers to my face. Or my chest, in this case. She was really short, being a child and all. “Of those that appeared to be deliberately targeted, it would start with the most well known or influential hero and work it’s way down as targets became available. Thirdly, those that survived its attention were disproportionately the most emotional. Hotheads, daredevils, the meatheads of the teams. While those who were more intelligent, or approached the battle from rational standpoints, died more often.”

“How did Doom make these connections?” I asked. “How did he know their thought

processes?"

"He was Victor Von' Doom," Valeria answered as if speaking to an idiot.

Dragon-Me? Status update on my miracle against pre teens? Pretty please?

"Anyone fighting an Endbringer was worthy of Doom's attention, so he had a psychological profile on them on top of their powers."

"My mistake," I snarked. "Please continue, oh professor of the obvious."

"I will," Valeria laughed, nose up in the air in a fake haughtiness. "But the final thing Uncle discovered was after the fight. The heroes targeted all reported the same thing, either from interviews, when drunk or talking to family in what they thought was privacy. They all felt an absolute moment of despair, helplessness, or fear. Either because they would die, their team would die, or the people they were defending would die. Yet they survived. It was a miracle to many."

"I don't believe in miracles." At least not in the non-spell variety.

Maybe not even in those since Dragon-Me hadn't given me my anti-cooties miracle.

"Neither do I," Valeria clapped joyfully, finally stopping before a door. In the fake apartments below it led to the fake Reed's lab, and they both looked like they could hold off a tank. "And neither did Uncle."

"Assuming this is all correct, the Endbringers weren't attacking to cause damage but to attract heroes. Which is at odds with their recent behaviour in this last attack. But it might be an outlier because of me. Back to Doom. So Behemoth was bringing them to their lowest point emotionally?" I asked rhetorically. "Why? Was it trying to trigger new powers in them?"

As Ciara proved, second triggers were still a thing in this world, and Supers with non-shard based powers could still develop them, as Doomsday proved, so was the Endbringer trying to increase triggers?

"That was one hypothesis," Valeria said as she input the code and scanned her iris and fingerprints into the console beside the lab door. "One that didn't hold up. The number of new powers developed in the heroes 'spared.' No, my Uncle theorized something else. Not the results of the emotion, but the emotion itself was the goal. It is the only explanation for why they would target specific individuals."

"That would be why the more empathetic and 'good' weren't targeted as often," I nodded, following that idea. "Those types feel emotions, the good and the bad, more than others."

"Right!" Valeria agreed, stepping through the now open door to the lab. I tried to follow her in, spotting various instruments and inventions, but she stepped out again. Holding a hand to have me wait, she input another code into the door and scanned the

back of her hand and earlobe. The lab door closed. “And, with their new, ruthless and effective mentality, these heroes tended to inflict similar negative emotions on the villains they fought. Nothing extremely out of character, or people would start to notice, but enough of a change for there to be a pattern for my Uncle to find. A web of despair starting from the Endbringers, infecting every Super in the world eventually, killing those that don’t succumb to the despair. Emotion is key.”

“I’m following so far. The Endbringers, or whatever is behind them, want Supers to feel bad feelings so they can get some sort of control over them. It’s convoluted, but it seems simple enough compared to other plots I’ve heard about. But to what goal? What is their endgame? Even if heroes are more ruthless, they still help people. They’re not suddenly murderous maniacs. It’s been years since Behemoth’s first attack.”

“Exactly! It’s been years,” Valeria cheered as we stood in front of the closed door to the lab for a minute. “Why wait once you have the most powerful heroes and villains under your control? Uncle never knew about Leviathan, Simurgh, or the other Endbringers, but they largely followed the same pattern. Ramping up and leaving most afflicted alive. Uncle had none of the perceptive we have now. Instead, he focused on a different question. Why did Behemoth attack then and there? Why attack an oil field first and not a city? New York would have been decimated if it had been the first target. Why then? Why not earlier or later? Why the time intervals between attacks?”

I knew a few of the answers to those questions, such as the Endbringer’s energy requirements, but others I had no answer for

“Uncle came to two conclusions after investigating,” Valeria said as she pushed one button on the control pad after waiting a specific amount of time since the lab door closed. “Firstly, the Super population had reached a threshold. A point by which there was enough of them, or they were strong enough, to meet a certain standard the Endbringers were waiting for. Secondly, Behemoth attacked when everyone was infected. Whatever control method they had, stimulated by despair or the equivalent emotion, was now present in everyone in the populous. My family included.”

The lab door opened to a completely different space than before.

Half the room was a massive computer set up with dozens of screens. News footage, data streams, what looked like DNA strands, or even star charts scrolled by.

The other half of the room was dedicated to five beds and the glass coffins on top of them.

I immediately recognized Doom’s iconic metal mask, and the other beds’ occupants were even more apparent. I had just seen robots of them walking around.

“Physically, they’re dead,” Valeria said, walking up to Doom’s bed and placing a hand

on the glass. “Spiritually, they are still alive. Their minds connected very loosely to their fake selves. My Uncle’s work. Their bodies are perfectly preserved. Time doesn’t pass for them. We have no idea whether whatever is inside of us can track the dead or see through their eyes, so we had to take all precautions. When this is all over, it will be like nothing happened to them. A long dream.”

“What did you do to yourself,” I asked with a tired sigh, rubbing my eyes as I remembered Emma’s words from the Gala.

“Only my brother and I had the neuroplascitiy to handle the emotional lobotomy,” Valeria Richards said with a wide smile. “So long as I undo it before my brain stops developing, I will have no long-term brain damage. I was the only option. I have no power to attract the attention of whatever is in us, even if I am infected, reducing the likelihood of it giving me any attention. All my inventions can be attributed to my dad or Uncle.”

“So it infects everyone but only focuses on powerful or influential people?” I clarified, and she nodded.

“Easier that way. Get them while they are weak, and control them when they get strong. Uncle Doom would inevitably be targeted, and a powerful enough psychic could get around our protections. He was right. Doomstadt was attacked three years ago, possibly to get him. His Doom-bots fooled everyone. But he couldn’t entrust the future to machines, as AI feel emotion, too. I was the only one he could entrust to find a cure while remaining anonymous. Everyone else could be working, unknowingly, for the Endbringer’s master. My family never knew. Only me and Uncle. And now, you are here.”

There might be no long-term brain damage, but I couldn’t help the melancholy at the idea of a six or seven-year-old girl being left with the responsibility of saving the world and her family.

I didn’t like children, but they should be able to be children. Let adults deal with the real world while they enjoy what innocence this world has.

Something Valeria never got to enjoy, cooped up as she was in this building with the corpses of her family.

Fucking comic bullshit.

“I can cure it,” I nodded, reaching for Doom’s body.

We’d be having… talks after I ‘freed’ him. I get that he had been working with what he had at the time, but his plan had too many holes. Entrust everything to six-year-old Valeria and hope she finds a ‘cure?’

This could be another thing that would fly in comics, but it was something I couldn’t accept.

“Don’t!”

“Why?” I asked as the little girl hurried to stop me.

“Uncle had limited information when he made his discovery,” Valeria hurried to explain. “It was the right call but for the wrong reasons. It doesn’t matter if there is a cure if they get infected again.”

“Did you find how this ‘infection’ spreads?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

I knew in Worm that Shards could ‘bud’, splitting off parts of themselves to people nearby to spread powers. Was that what was happening?

“No,” she shook her head, still smiling. She was unable to stop. “It could be digital, airborne, through touch, or all of the above. I have found no trace of any substance in DNA, no psychic power or magical control. This, whatever it is, is either too small to be discovered or too large to be comprehended.”

“Why would that stop me from poking sleeping beauty?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure we’re isolated here. If not, I can bring them to my Island and do it there.”

“Then we lose,” Valeria giggled as if I had told a joke. “All I know is that every alien that has arrived on Earth since I started observing has exhibited the same symptoms. Sometimes after days, sometimes hours. They desire to inflict despair. To heroes, villains, anyone really. Joker might use terror, but Superman uses his power alone. All of them do it in one form or another. It’s the trigger, the button push, that puts them under control, but it is not the infection itself. The root cause. Treating a symptom does not heal the disease.”

“Then why did you invite me if not to cure them?”

“Because you are the only one who can stop whatever this is. I can keep my family safe, but only you can save them and the world.”

As proof, she pressed another button on her remote, and the dozens of computer screens all started playing images of the same event.

I watched a video of myself handing the Godslaying Blade to Diana and her plunging it into Doomsday’s skull.

“Do you also want my sword?” I asked. Did people only want me for my weapons and not me? Wasn’t the greatest weapon the friends we made along the way?

“No?” Valeria half asked. “Why would I want a sword?”

“Swords are cool,” I pointed out. “But if not my weapon, why are you showing me this?”

“Because it’s proof you aren’t being controlled.” Valeria gestured at the screen. “Doomsday would have succeeded in laying waste to Metropolis, killing dozens of heroes and tens of thousands of civilians without you. Then you stared down the strongest heroes of this world without flinching. That’s when I knew. You’re too powerful to feel despair by

anything Earth can throw at you, even if you are infected. Everything after has just proven it. You were bantering with Trigon the Terrible! You're not scared of anything here, are you?"

Much like her Uncle before her, she came to the correct conclusion for the wrong reasons. It wasn't that I didn't feel fear. I couldn't be controlled either because of my Defences or my Element.

Still, this put another piece in the puzzle I had been assembling.

I had gotten what I came for.

"Please," Valeria Richards begged me with a smile. "Elden Lord. Mikael. Please save my world. Please save my family."

Little girls. The worst.

Especially since I was going to be a father soon.

"Why bring me here?" I asked instead of making a promise I might not be able to keep. "Why show me them? I could be an asshole and take all the cool shit in this building for myself. Kill you and finish these guys off and get the fuck out. I don't need to help you or save the world. I am not a hero. So, why me?"

"Because I don't have a choice anymore. I've failed," Valeria said with a laugh as she twirled. "I failed to find a cure. I failed to even find out how it spreads. And we're out of time. The pattern shifted. I should have over a decade left before my alterations are irreversible and two more before the world ends. But you messed it all up."

"While I do enjoy fucking things up, I really don't like being accused of things I didn't do," I said, not letting on how much her forced cheer put me off. "It's a pet peeve of mine."

"But you did," Valeria said, pushing another button and some of the screens shifted.

One still showed the Doomsday incident, but the others were footage of me eating the Simurgh and my wives killing the Endbringers. Leviathan was absent, as none of the heroes and their bodycam footage were there for that fight.

"Your presence forced it to accelerate its schedule," Valeria giggled as Tohu floated above the Jewel. Its small body was only one of many flying or Mover Supers that had gathered under the call of Emma's Semblance. "It released Doomsday to cause despair after the loss of Simurgh gave people hope. When that failed, it tried with numbers and distraction, which also failed. More Supers fell under its sway, certainly, but it lost valuable tools."

"Tools that are disposable," I pointed out. If this thing was the same thing that had the entities under its control, then Endbringers were nothing compared to Eden, Zion, and the Supers of Marvel and DC under its control.

“But it lost something,” the little girl insisted, clapping joyfully. “I have never managed that. Now? Now, it will have to take drastic action, and it will be against you, who have stopped it repeatedly. The enemy of my enemy might not be my friend, but it will be my enemy’s enemy.”

“And I assume you don’t know who or where this thing is?” I asked with a sigh. A part of me admired the whole ‘eminence in the shadow’ aspect of my enemy, but man was it annoying I couldn’t go and blow it up. I wanted to be the shadowy mastermind, damn it. “Preemptive attacks are kinda my thing.”

I had been gathering all this information from Ciara, the gods, from my own investigations and now from this brain-damaged girl, but I still had nothing actionable.

I had no way to seize the initiative.

I hated that.

I hated having to wait for someone else to make a move. I flourished in situations when I made plans instead of reacting. And it felt like shit to wait for an enemy to make a move instead of forcing them to dance to my toon.

I was a control freak like that.

“I know it’s not on Earth,” Valeria shrugged. “Not in space either, at least not this solar system. A parallel world line is my best approximation. It works through mediums. What little psychological profile I have been able to build indicates it has an enormous ego, thus seeing no point in doing things itself when it has minions or slaves. It is patient, operating for decades without change, which means it is a creature without fear of death by age. And it has a goal. One that needs an army of Supers. It’s why it is waiting so long and actively encourages the spread of powers. Your presence accelerated its plans by decades.”

That… did and didn’t help me. I couldn’t just jump from parallel world to parallel world, hoping to blindly stumble upon this Hidden Boss.

Well, I could. The perks of infinite power.

But even if I spent only a second in each world, there were unlimited versions of Earth, and my tests with Raven proved that time did not freeze between realities. So I could be gone for years and never encounter anything.

It would explain the Entities’ need and ability to work across different realities. And it helped me narrow down my list of possible suspects and methods.

“So, will you help me save the world?” Valeria asked. “With your ability to operate without fear of its control and my direction, we can work together to hunt this thing down.”

“I promise nothing, and I don’t follow orders,” I said immediately. Valeria’s smile

didn't leave, but it did dim slightly. I continued. "But, I don't mind working with smart people. Even if they are super creepy."

"Yes!" Valeria cheered with a little fist pump. Then she held out her hand, pinky extended. "One of the last things my mom told me was that you must seal a deal. So shake on it. Let's save the world."

For all her genius, Valeria Richards was still a girl who had been left on her own since she was six. Emotionally stunted, literally and figuratively, she followed the words of her parental figures, Doom included.

That, or she was fucking with me.

I gave it even odds.

"Let's try to save the world."

With a bemused smile of my own, I pinky swore with the world's smartest girl.

I also internally sighed.

There were already rumblings in the Family about Tsunade's impending pregnancy and who wanted children and who didn't.

When they learned of Valeria's situation, they were going to force me to adopt this sassy small child, wouldn't they?

Author's Note:

I'll be honest, I don't like this one. I've revised it and changed it a half dozen times. It became way longer and more exposition-heavy than I would have liked, but some things needed to be explained, even if I am still unsatisfied. So many dominoes I planted early in volume 2 have fallen, and so many to come. Some are overt, and some are subtle.

Either way, we march towards the end.

Did everything come out clearly? If not, things will become clearer after Consequences.

Things will be ramping back up slowly now that a lot of the wrap-up for the end of Volume 2 is done.

That will have to wait for a bit as next week will be a PHO interlude, possibly the last of the story, and after that, a Side Story, with a side of lewdness.

I will see you all next week.

SIDE STORY I:
SITEMARES

"I am regularly asked what the average Internet user can do to ensure his security. My first answer is usually 'Nothing; you're screwed'."
-Bruce Schneier

■

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in, FamilyFloofDragon

You are viewing:

• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

■

♦ Topic: Memorial

In: Boards ► ALL

Tinmother (Original Poster) (Moderator)

Posted On Nov 19th 2018:

In the wake of the recent Endbringer attack, three of our moderators have passed.

As tradition, this post will remain pinned for two weeks before being archived in our Lost Hall. For those who have final words to say about the fallen, please post them under their names in the Hall.

We might have never met in person, but these were our friends, nonetheless.

Their deaths are a loss to us all.

@Tearamisu: One of the longest active mods. They first joined only a few months after the site launched and remained a pillar, always available to help newer members or provide advice for those willing to listen.

Kraken-Laken: With the seventh highest number of posts out of all mods, they were one of the most active and social members of this platform. Their sense of humor and

quick-wit, their vivacity and joy-de-vivre, it will be remembered by all who can look at their numerous messages and know Kraken was one of the kindest, most cheerful people I have had the pleasure of working with.

@Quietus: Most will not know of Quietus. They rarely posted and hardly interacted with our members directly. Do not believe for an instant they were not there, however. Quietus cared more about this site and community than anyone else. They, on average, worked fourteen hours a day in ensuring the smooth operation of our day-to-day usage. Their quiet dedication shall never be forgotten by those who knew them.

These three are but the moderators who lost their lives. We know many of our members must have passed as well. As always, if you know one of our members that are no longer with us, please send a PM here. We will verify it and add their names to the Hall.

In this time of loss, we urge everyone to give up any differences of opinions and secular squabbles so we can take the time to mourn, not only the members of our community but all the losses our members are facing in their day-to-day life.

Please be aware that breaking any of the site's rules for the next month will incur triple their usual punishment.

Any rule broken in the Lost Hall will result in immediate account deletion.

This is a time to come together, not tear each other apart.

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►**JoeSnow** (Veteran Member)

Replied On Nov 19th 2018:

My first week, I was to shy to post anything. Responses or new threads. I ended up asking Tear for advice and our conversation went back and forth for over a month. For them to be gone is a tragedy. I still don't post much, and it's been years, but I will never forget something they told me:

Why do Supers wear masks? Because anonymity is a superpower in of itself. The only one we have.

I am pouring one out for you buddy.

If anyone needs help getting started, PM me.

►**Damzels** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Nov 19th 2018:

Tear was great. They were the first responder to my Fanfic. It wasn't much, but it was enough to motivate me.

I don't drink, but I am lighting some incense for you.

►**DownUnderYou**

Replied On Nov 19th 2018:

I don't know if its a good thing or not (please spare me mods if it isn't) but I just keep thinking of the types of responses Kraken would make in this situation. He'd be like: Looks like I finally 'Kraked' or 'Don't light incense for me, I already got smoked!'

His jokes were awful, but I don't think he ever made one at anybody's expense but his own.

►**PenutsBetter (Moderator)**

Replied On Nov 20th 2018:

I don't know which is sadder, that we have these great stories about Tear and Kraken, or that there are so few about Quietus. Is it better to be diligent and unobtrusive, or engaging but less effective?

Either way, I'm majorly bummed. I'm going to lie down.

►**Bulletdodger**

Replied On Nov 20th 2018:

I didn't really know any of them, or engage with them on any sort of deep level like some others. The site is too big to know everyone. But the fact that netizens like me even remember them and have these stories tells you everything you need to know about them so I will toast three more lost in the line of duty.

►**Loyal**

Replied On Nov 20th 2018:

Keyboard Warriors never die. They are just AFK.

Cheers

►**Bedwarmer**
Replied On Nov 20th 2018:

Cheers.

►**Antigone**
Replied On Nov 20th 2018:

Cheers!
…is it wrong to be happy that we only lost three mods and 24 members? I remember when Behemoth first attacked New York and the Lost Hall was first set up. Hundreds died. I am not trying to minimize the loss to those who knew them, I am just grateful damage was mitigated thanks to the Heroes and The Family. Five Endbringers, six if you count Sebbetu. It could have been so much worse.

►**QIgonShin** (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Nov 20th 2018:

The chinese side of the site has it a lot worse. They're still counting the dead and already their Hall increased by over a thousand names. I do agree it could have been worse and I am grateful it wasn't but we can't forget that we are only seeing the English speaking side of it.
And the number is at 25 members now. Char was near the CN tower when Khonsu arrived. They found her body this morning.

►**Antigone**
Replied On Nov 20th 2018:

Fuck
End of Page. 1, 2, 3 … 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 … 54, 55, 56
■
♦ **Topic: Power UP!**
In: Boards ► Supers ► Elden Lord
EarthShaker (Original Poster) (Super Groupie)
Posted On Nov 22nd 2018:

Instead of focusing on the existential fear that is making up my existence for the last week, I am consciously choosing to focus on the important things in life. Not the fact that we've been mastered for six years by an Endbringer, or that they were sandbagging and still whooped ass, or that there are who knows how many out there that could show up at the drop of a hat. I am not focusing on any of that, are you? Instead I am dedicating all my thoughts to the only thing that really matters:

Powers and how awesome they are.

Maybe now I won't cry myself to sleep tonight.

Anyway, existential dread aside, we've gotten a lot of good shit over the last week from the Elden Lord and the Family in that regard. There are dedicated threads for each of them: HERE but I wanted to focus on Heartbreak and any new stuff in one place. Here is my list, in the order they appeared (as far as I know.)

Everyone: Turn into dragons (Everyone knew this before but I think it's important to emphasis that not all the dragons are the same size/power/specialty)

Tsunade: Cloning (No word on limit, but each of them can use her powers)

Tsunade: Healing. (Not biomancy, like Red Queen but actually healing.)

Everyone: Temperature/radiation/Environmental? immunity (however they survived Behemoth's Kill aura)

Yoruichi: Speedster level speed (maybe? how do you test that) She might also have some sort of Thinker ability. How else did she find Khonsu?

Yoruichi: Lightning (Is this a power or a result of the speed?)

Raven: Teleportation. (Again, everyone knows about this one but this goth demon/ dragon teleported MILLIONS OF PEOPLE over the course of a few minutes. This needs a mention.)

Tsunade: Wood Mech? (I don't know why people are calling is a Female Titan. Maybe a reference I don't get. Either way, I choose to believe it's a mech and you can't stop me.)

Tsunade: Immortality/Healing factor (She got her heart ripped out and shrugged it off. You can see it regrow. It's awesome)

Artoria: Spear lazer of DOOM!!! (No relation to Doom. Just a fuckoff spear of light that managed to turn Brockon's bay into the new Mariana Trench while reducing Behemoth to atoms. I don't know enough about fishing to know if this is good or not for the city.)

Elden Lord: Heartbreak

Elden Lord: THE HEALER!!! (Like, jesus christ, I cannot emphasis how OP this is. The

Dragon just healed EVERYONE ON THE FUCKING PLANET OF EVERYTHING!! I don't know what it cost him, if there's a cooldown, or what. But even if this is something that can only be done every decade, we NEED him on earth. Cancer? Gone. Lost limbs? They're back. Blind people can see. Deaf people can hear. Burn victims are pristine. MY FUCKING ED IS CURED! WTF!!) EDIT: I am leaving that part in. I am not ashamed.

Priscilla: Death Scythe (She bisected an Endbringer. You can't tell me that's raw strength and not a power.)

Tsunade: All the food. (She can singlehandedly solve world hunger. Apart from the Elden Lord, we need her the most.)

Medea: Spooky Scary Skeletons (Their not human, they don't even have skulls, but there are MILLIONS of them carving a city out of a mountain.)

EDIT2: There is an official story about Sebbetu out, but it doesn't reveal anything we didn't know before.

EDIT3: Wonder Woman's report just leaked about the fight with Leviathan.

Robin: Clones. Dragon clones. (There is no footage of this battle, so we only have the report. The exact words were 'Enough clones to drown the ocean')

Scathach: You are already dead Spear (Apparently, she killed Leviathan with one stab from within the monster.)

Is that everything? Let me know if I am missing something.

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►Notparanoid

Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

All I am asking is where was he during the fight? His wives were fighting but the Elden Lord was nowhere to be found. Some of them almost died but he didn't show up. What was he doing?

►InvisibleGhost223432

Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

Controlling the Endbringers. Isn't it suspicious that they are around for years but nothing like this happens until he shows up? It was a stage show, none of his Family were in any danger. The Elden Lord is fooling you all.

►Notparanoid

Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

I wouldn't go that far, but there is some suspicious points. Like where did go after the meeting. Or why, in the middle of the attack, did his body dissapear from the Island? That was before Heartbreak. Then, he only appears way after the fighting is done to heal everyone? There are a lot of questions.

►**InvestiGator** (Unverified Super)
Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

I think you two are kinda skipping some questions that break your 'theory.'

Why: What is there motive? Why do all of this? Power? He bodied the League. Prestige? Everyone knows his name. Women? Right now, he could have anyone he wanted, man or woman, with Heartbreak.

Who: We can argue about conspiracies until we're blue in the face, but we have to work with what we actually know, not what 'could be.' Let's take what we know about the guy. Devoted to his Family. Sense of humor. OP yet doesn't do anything unless poked. The dude bants with an invading interdimensional Demon Lord, had his daughter EAT him from the inside, and then what does he do? He goes for tacos.

When: Why now? If he did have some machievellian scheem to come out as the hero who saved the day, why now? Why not wait till we're ground down more and other Endbringers are active? We'd be willing to do whatever he wanted if we had been deeling with a half dozen Endbringers for years.

There are a few other things that stick out, but those are the ones off the top of my head. I am all for being suspicious, but I don't think there is any reason to suspect the Elden Lord is behind the Endbringers.

►**InvisibleGhost223432**
Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

(Deleted)

►**Brilliger** (Moderator: Protectorate Main)
Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

@InvisibleGhost223432 Calling everyone who disagrees with you Tohu bombs over the line. Take a few months to think about why.

►**TyprittenMonkey**
Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

How'd we get from talking powers to trading conspiracy theories?

►**Mane Magenta**
Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

@TyprittenMonkey Forum's gotta Forum.

►**TyprittenMonkey**
Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

Preach

►**Affectionstarved**
Replied On Nov 22nd 2018:

I have a power related question:

If all the dragons are different types and sizes, can they fuck? What are the logistics of the Dragon Elden Lord (Picture an elephant) trying to bone Dragon Yoruichi (picture an mouse)

I think that would be the real miracle.

■

♦ **Topic: Heartbroken**
In: Boards ► Super ► Incidents ► Discussions
Bentwise (Original Poster)
Posted On Nov 21st 2018:

I am a consummate lurker and this is my first post, but I need to get this out and I don't have IRL friends or family so let me word vomit for a bit.

I feel empty.

Like a hole I didn't know was there was suddenly filled and I was complete. Then the

hole was back.

I know why He did it. I know thirty seconds of mastering in exchange for killing an Endbringer is a small price to pay. But dammit! What am I supposed to do with myself now?

I liked the Elden Lord. He seemed like a down to earth type of guy, despite the power and the women. I could respect that. But for those thirty seconds, I loved him. Not because of anything he did, saving my life, killing the Simurgh, or other Endbringers, or that He and His Family saved my life.

I loved him because He loved me. Loved me in a way nobody ever has or ever will again.

I know everyone's experience was subtly different, but I'm sure many of you are orphans like me. You must have felt it. Like a father or brother I never had. Caring. Gentle, but firm. Like all He wanted from me was to live a long, happy life. Like I was His hope.

But now that's gone, and I hate Him.

I don't hate Him because I was mastered.

I hate Him because I am not mastered anymore.

…

Whew. I needed to get that off my chest. I know this is screaming into the void, and possibly opening myself up to ridicule, but there is nobody else I can tell this to. If you all want to scream back, feel free. Especially if you're from Gotham like me. We need to stick together.

Edit: I didn't expect this to become a group therapy thread, but I am glad it did. You all are awesome.

Edit: Since the thread got too long, I started another one HERE. I think we all need to vent a little.

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►Dailuute

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

@Shostops I didn't feel anything like that. I felt desired. Wanted. Lusted for. Like all my flaws, my weight, and my scars made me prettier instead of ugly.

For thirty seconds, I was the most beautiful woman in the world. A Dragon God wanted ME! I didn't care that he had other wives. I wasn't thinking of that at all. All I could think about was how much I was worth in his eyes.

That feeling… it was intoxicating.

►**Cornwhole**

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

@Dailuute Same. Only my come down was more jarring. At least you can have the fantasy of him choosing a new wife. I don't even have that. Mikael isn't gay.

►**Affectionstarved**

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

@Cornwhole That you know of 🅾🅱🅹

supportive family and friends. What I felt wasn't lust, or romantic in the slightest. Mikael's love wasn't trying to turn me 'normal' or some other bullshit. There was a reliability there. A love from a best friend. The type of love where you can call him, shitfaced, at 3:37 in the morning and he'll come pick you up, bring you to his place, give you water, advil, and a bucket and put you to bed. Then mock you mercilessly about it for the next two decades.

►**Coyote-C**
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

@Mapstaffed Mikael does seem to be that type, doesn't he? Even ignoring Heartbreak, every interview or bit of footage makes him seem like he'd be the type to have your back even as he jokes about it.

►**Feychick**
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

Could be a persona. Like a personality he wants other people to assume he has.

►**Saskatchew**
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

Could be, but I doubt it. Remember the resurrection video? He had no idea he was on camera and he still acted the same.

►**Spiritskin**
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

This is my scream in the void.

Power. It was all about power for me. I don't know if that makes me shallow or what, but I felt like a god. We know the Elden Lord is a Trump: Infinity or some bullshit. Even ignoring all the perks Glory Girl said she got, just being able to turn into a dragon, like everyone in the Family can, would be enough to make me powerful enough to be a hero.

Powerful enough to roast the bastard who killed my wife and kids.

►**Saddelite** (Verified Super)

Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

@Spiritskin That doesn't make you shallow. It makes you human. My Heartbreak was the opposite. Instead of elevating me, or wanting me for my power, it felt like I could let it go. Like I was normal again. No powers, no mutation.

Just me and Him.

►**Ryus**

Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

Peace. That's all I felt. No complicated emotions. No villains or crises. Just serene peace.

►**Logs**

Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

@Ryus I think we all want that. Peace and love.

►**FakeAccount2**

Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

Fair warning, this is a second account, as you can tell by the name. I am definitely not brave enough to say this with my main account.

I came. A lot. The entire Heartbreak was one long orgasm for me. You all have these in-depth thoughts and contemplation on the nature of love, the universe, or the Elden Lord. I had the best sex of my life and it was over in thirty seconds. And now its all downhill from here. Am I lucky to experience Heartbreak like that or worse off since I know I will never reach that high again.

►**Quasitree** (Verified Super)

Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

We all reached a high we never will again. You just got a more… hands on experience than us. I don't know if you are luckier or not.

I would't trade those thirty seconds with my children for anything in the world.

►**Iblis**
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

I know you probably don't mean anything by it, but can you please give more context? Going from 'orgasm' to 'children' is giving me some seriously bad mental images.

►**Quasitree** (Verified Super)
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

We lived in Okinawa in 2016.

►**Iblis**
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

Damn. Sorry for your loss and for bringing it up.

►**Quasitree** (Verified Super)
Replied On Nov 24th 2018:

It's fine. I, like everyone else, felt Heartbreak. But I think it gave me the closure I've never had before.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 … 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 … 997, 998, 999

■

♦ **Topic: Dragons Dragons Dragons**
In: Boards ► Supers ► Powers
Mr. Fabuu (Original Poster)
Posted On Nov 21st 2018:

With everything going on, I wanted to make a more lighthearted thread so here is the prompt:

Dragons typically have elements (Fire, Ice, light, etc…) but the Family has a bunch of esoteric elements as far as I can tell. (Wood, Telekinesis?, Cat-lightning???)

If you could be a dragon of one element, no esoteric, what would you be? No wrong answers.

I'll go first.

I'd be a Size Dragon. Grow as big or as small as I want. I don't mean just Ant-Man's abilities, I mean anything I want. Microscopic to 'eat galaxies.' I could use it in some really creative ways, like only increasing the size of my hands or.. other appendages. My breath would shrink all my enemies to the size of fruit flies.

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►**Blasestrom**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

That's easy. Death Dragon. Kill anything and everything.

►**Babliothick**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

Ok Mr. Edgelord. That's kind of an all or nothing ability, isn't it? Just kill a bunch of people? You'd have the heroes on your ass in seconds. Naw, there is one obvious right answer and everyone who disagrees is plain wrong.

Sex Dragon.

I win this little game. And life in general. You may bask in my glory now.

►**Mr. Fabuu** (Original Poster)

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

On the one hand, you have my ever lasting admiration and loyalty. On the other hand, BONK! Get back in horni jail!

►**Space Zombie**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

T'is a silly question. Be a Dragon of Dragons. Then you get all the elements.

►**Blurbs** (Verified Super)

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

Dream Dragon? Anything you can dream of is your element?

►**CatagoryQueen**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

I think the idea isn't to min-max, but to be what would be best fit for you personally. Like what would you enjoy the most.

►**Space Zombie**
Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

That's ridiculous. Infinite power is what I'd enjoy the most.

►**Bleedsrith**
Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

Then what? The Elden Lord isn't omnipotent despite being the biggest dragon around, but say you do become a 'Dragon of Dragons,' what do you do? Goal, motivation, or dream? What propels something with infinite power? They can get anything they want with a thought. That… hollow, boring? I'm trying to find the right way to describe it, but I just think it wouldn't be fufilling.

►**Changels**
Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

I do agree with you, but again, I think we are getting away from the spirit of the thread. And you all are being boring with your ideas. Let's get creative:

-Dragon of Beginnings: Never die as you have no end. And everyone knows the beginning is the best part of everything.
-Dragon of Desks: Be the terror of office workers everywhere. Everything is a desk if you're brave enough.
-Dragon of That Thing in the Corner or Your Eye: The Ultimate Stranger! They know you're there but can do nothing about it… on second thought, forget this one. A bit too eldritch horror.
-Dragon of Carl: No explanation needed, the name speaks for itself.
Instead of getting philosophical, let's get wacky.

►**Mr. Fabuu** (Original Poster)

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

'Dragon of Carl: No explanation needed, the name speaks for itself.'

No, I need an explanation right now. At least six pages long, single spacing in times new roman. I need sources, quotes, and at least one feature film.

I need it.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 … 31, 32, 33

■

♦ Topic: Book of Consorts 23

In: Boards ► Supers ► Elden Lord ► Book of Dragons

MR.Krew (Original Poster)

Posted On Nov 23rd 2018:

Third Book of Consorts. 23:1-25

'Your city is destroyed' She called, appearing from on high, cloaked in magic and mystery. 'Your lives, ruined.'

'Save us!' They begged Lade Medea. 'Our people, slain. Our homes, lost. Our stomachs, empty. Deliver us from this misery. Bring back what we lost.'

'What is lost is forever lost,' she chastised. 'Weep. Lament. But march forward.'

'Can the Great Lord not bring back the dead?' They accused. 'Can he not undo all done unto us?'

'What then? Will the dead never know peace? Will you never put another foot forward, always seeking a step back? My Lord has healed you of all ails so that you might walk your own path.'

Lady Medea glowed with magical might and the people bowed their heads for they knew shame.

'I come not to deliver judgement.' She declared, seeing their tears. 'I come with my sisters to deliver hope. Let Beijing rest, a monument to your loss. Let future generations know of the might of the foes we faced. We must work. Lady Tsuande will render unto you food and shelter. I shall carve you a city unlike any other'

And Lady Medea became as she truly was, shedding Her beautiful human form for the Truth. A Dragon of Magic, delicate and feminine, outshone the sun with the splendor of royal scales.

From her mouth a thousand thousand teeth fell. From the fallen teeth, warriors of dragon bone rose.

Fearful, the people retreated from these men of bone. But the warriors were agents of

peace, not war.

These warriors put down their swords, bows, and spears. They gathered up hammer and nail, chisel and saw.

‘With my very body I shall build you a city in the mountain. A city of wonder, the like of which man has never known. A city so that you may walk forward, head held high.’

And the people rejoiced in the salvation of the Dragons.

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►**Addons**

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

Bra-men

►**Drunkrin**

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

Bar-men

►**Bentwise**

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

Bra-men

Ps: You misspelled chisel. With an s, not a z.

►**MR.Krew** (Original Poster)

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

@Bentwise Thanks, typo. You are truly one of the faithful.

►**Thersir** (Veteran Member)

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

I don’t want to be ‘that guy’ but is this really alright? I mean, isn’t this disrespectful for the people of Beijing? A lot of people died.

►**PenutsBetter (Moderator)**

Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

Not really? I mean this one mentions the city in specific but not in a derogatory sense. If anything, the one about Brockton is harsher on the people but even then it toes the line. Brockton was a shithole. (might still be, we'll see how they rebuild) So long as none of it uses hate speech, calls others to action, or other things that violate the rules, we let things like this slide.

►**OhighO**
Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

I'm out. I was all for wacky fake religions but it seems like some people are getting a little too into it, if you know what I mean. An official church of the Elden Lord was registered and is actively preaching.

►**Thersir** (Veteran Member)
Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

Does the Elden Lord know that? Like is it official in that it's gone through the paperwork of the US government or is it official in that Mikael endorsed it?

►**Savehalf**
Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

I don't think he cares, to be honest. He's made his stance on religion pretty clear. Do whatever you want, just leave me out of it.

►**PenutsBetter** (Moderator)
Replied On Nov 23rd 2018:

@Thersir I double checked to be sure. The official word from our Great Mother in Tin is that praising someone (or a Family) too much isn't a punishable offense. So having a bunch of threads dedicated to a religion, (and collaboratively writing a bible-esque series of books) even if it is dedicated to someone still alive, is permissible. Just like the Scientologist, Christian, or Buddhist sections of the site, you can choose not to engage. Freedom of religion applies to all beliefs, not just long running ones.

■

♦ Topic: Legit or false?

In: Boards ► Advice ► Medicine

Qualityquantity (Original Poster)

Posted On Nov 21st 2018:

So, before I stab myself with this vial of red liquid, can anyone tell me if this is legit?

It said it heals any recent wound and I would really like my back to stop hurting, (fell off a ladder) but I don't want to get cancer to do it.

(Showing page 1 of 8)

►Bittertruth

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

sounds sus, don't do it.

►Chaosfaith

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

sounds sus, do it.

►Divide

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

Your sacrifice in the name of SCIENCE! will be remembered!

►Footpath

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

Ignore the guys above me, it's legit. Got a pretty bad cut on my leg the day after the Elden Lord healed everyone (my luck strikes again). Cut an artery. There's no healer in my city but they had a crate of the stuff. Healed me right up in seconds.

►Qualityquantity (Original Poster)

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

@Footpath any side effects?

►**Footpath**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

It's FDA approved and the Docs told me there isn't. They kept me over night to be safe. But I feel great. Better than ever. I think I'll go for a run, it's been a while.

►**Munchmunch**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

How much does it cost? Something like that can't be cheap.

►**Newsie**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

It is. Two weeks ago, this would have been all over the news and would sell for thousands of dollars but now you can get it for under a hundred. I think the Elden Lord fucked the creators over when he healed everyone on earth.

►**Puplesteel** (Verified Tinker)

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

Hah! The Elden Lord is the best thing to ever happen to earth and I'll take twenty. Just to screw over Big Pharma.

►**Footpath**

Replied On Nov 21st 2018:

Shit! Guys! Get this stuff now! I just came back from my run. It doesn't just heal, it improves what it heals. Like that micro tear stuff you hear about all the time.

I just beat my best time by a fucking landslide. I am not Super level but I have never been that fast or had that much stamina. I don't know where the gains cap at, but I am going to find out.

Author's Note:

Call me naive, but I like to think that in a world like this there'd be something to commemorate those lost in villain/monster/alien attacks. I tried something a bit different this time too. Less focus on the events themselves, and more on the people behind the screen. Some good, some bad, all internet.

As always, formatting is the best I can do. But errors in spelling or typing is (mostly) intentional. Got to have the authentic forum experience after all. I also tried to spread topics a bit wider. There are still largely focused on the Family (Duh, after Heartbreak and the Endbringer attacks, on top of them being the focus of the story) I could just put in some random PHO threads (not focusing on the events of the story, but on heroes, civilians, or day-to-day life) but that wouldn't benefit the story itself. I chose which threads to write by asking myself a question:

Does this help the story move forward or convey information that needs to be conveyed? If not, I don't write it.

I will see you all next week for a bit of leading.

SIDE STORY II:
CHILDHOOD'S BEGINNING (ADULT)

"Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children."
-Sitting Bull

"GIVE ME YOUR BABIES!!" Pride screamed, trying to lunge at me, hands grabbing for pants.

Raven held her back by the collar of her cloak, a mortified look on her usually expressionless face.

Apparently, Pride was taking offence to the fact that she, and by extension Raven, wouldn't have my 'heir' or some bullshit. It was apparently a BIG DEAL to Demon Lords.

Or so she said.

I think she just wanted a bit of 'daddy time' with the extra emphasis on 'daddy.'

"Next time," I waived off with a smirk.

Everyone was very focused on children for obvious reasons. Valeria's situation exacerbated it.

I didn't want to say anything cliche about 'maternal instincts,' but it is basic science that older members of species feel a need to ensure the well-being of the younger members. That's just how life has evolved. It varies from species to species and person to person, but humans have it worse than most because of how long we are children, and thus need more care than most animals.

"Have fun," Yoruichi teased Tsunade with a waggle of her eyebrows as we left the dining room.

The former Hokage flipped the shinigami the bird, and Yoruichi cackled in laughter. The others gave various forms of encouragement to the blonde, from Artoria's silent nod of support to Priscilla's embarrassed blush and near-silent squeak.

I took the chance to take in the reactions of the others for any issues. I didn't see any in particular. Melina was inscrutable as usual, and Ranni was all for it. Apparently, it was my 'duty to ensure an heir to my line.' Robin and Diana were supportive, and Scathach didn't particularly care. In her eyes, having kids wasn't such a grand affair.

Medea and Emma had looks of longing, but they held it in and gave their support.

It had been a Family decision to keep pregnancies to only one at a time. This minimized the loss of manpower when we still didn't have a concrete idea of the exact situation of this world. There had been some talk about leaving this reality. Still, until we

knew things were truly unsalvageable, nobody wanted to abandon all we had built here and potentially doom everyone on this planet.

Still, we were taking precautions.

Tsunade wouldn't be under house arrest or anything, but she wouldn't ever be left alone, always accompanied by an Emoticlone and one of the Family. She agreed it was better that way, as we didn't know how a pregnancy would affect things like the Catalogue. I was already iffy about risking lives just because we had Warranty Plan, and I wasn't willing to risk an unborn child being included with the woman if it did work.

We left the dining room with cheers, jeers, and lewd comments. Knowing them, they'd stay up for another few hours drinking and celebrating.

That left the two of us to talk on the way back to the master bedroom. While the Family needed to be involved with all of our children, some things should be left up to the direct parents, at least in our situation.

"Before anything else, we need to make a few choices," I said as I led the stacked blonde to my room.

"Like?" Tsunade asked with a raised brow.

"First off, and I don't think this has come up before, but I have a few perks of Catalogue that apply," I explained as I opened the door. "You all know I control my fertility, so we haven't been worrying about birth control. I might have said this already, but I have complete control. If I want someone pregnant, they will be. Ovulating or not, no condom or pill will stop it."

"I hadn't worried. You're not the only one who can control their fertility. You need the Catalogue to do it for you. I'm all skill," Tsunade smirked as she entered my room. She paused, raising an eyebrow at the loveseat I had installed and the bottle of sake. "What's all this?"

"As I said," I shrugged, pulling her down to sit with me. "We have a few things to talk about, and I figured you'd enjoy a drink before you can't for nine months."

"Don't worry about that. I'm more than capable of isolating alcohol and its effects from the child," Tsunade said, but she did pour the drink into saucers. "I appreciate the thought, but Chakra solves many issues."

"While that's good to know, it does touch on the other facet of the Catalogue I purchased that never came up." She sipped at her sake, pressing herself into me, her large breasts distending against my chest. I sipped my own as my hand reached her plump ass to get a handful. "'Designer Babies.' That's what the perk was called."

"Excuse me?" She asked with narrowed eyes.

It took a moment to realize the context for her suspicion. She came from a world

where bloodlines were very important, her own being one of the most coveted. Breeding programs, eugenics, and other, more horrific, acts had been committed to get Bloodline Abilities for villages.

"Not in the way you're thinking," I calmed her down, and she took another sip. "Essentially, it was a perk that could be taken multiple times, each improving how much control I have over my eventual children. If I had taken all three levels, I would have been able to choose even their appearance. I didn't get all three levels, only the first two, as I did want some randomness."

"That's good," she said with approval. "This will be our child, not a product or good to be designed. But what about the other two levels? I assume this is what you are talking about?"

"Yep," I nodded, slipping my hand under her tight pants to fondle her ass cheeks directly. "The first is the basic of basics, what gender? I am leaving this choice up to you because I would be happy with either."

"A son," Tsunade answered instantly. "I want a son."

"That was easy," I said with a chuckle, having expected a bit more back and forth. "It will be nice to have some testosterone in the house. The next choice is, do you want one child or twins?"

"Hmm," Tsunade hummed in thought. "I would be happy either way. Do you have a preference?"

"To be honest? I think I'd want twins," I mused in contemplation as I put down my drink to grab a fistful of her enormous breasts. Tsunade's breath hitched, but she kept drinking and listening to me. "Twins ran in my Family, usually along the female line, but still. Also, I am a firm believer that single children are terrible. I know it's not a concern in this Family, but who knows what will happen in the future. Brothers will be able to rely on each other if nothing else."

"Twins then," Tsunade nodded, and my fingers found her nipple. I pinched. She spilled sake down her chin. I grinned. "Anything else?" The blonde asked, eyes narrowing once again, but annoyance was second to arousal.

"Two more things," I nodded, and with reluctance, I pulled my hands away from her inviting body. She raised a brow. "Both are pretty serious. Firstly, do you want our children together to have Chakra? Only you have it, so only your children can gain it. The second level of Designer Babies lets me control the 'hybridization' of my kids. Racial traits and the like. This means I can ensure they do or don't get it."

"I just always assumed my kids would have it. Everyone did in my home, even civilians," she said as she lapsed into thought. "If they have it and the other kids don't, it

could lead to jealousy."

"I am not too worried about that," I shook my head. "Most of you have some sort of heritage. It will just vary from child to child. And all my kids will be dragons, eventually, with the ability to train Haki and Aura. I was thinking more about their descendants. We're not just having kids. We're having kids that will have kids that will have kids. We are looking down the barrel end of eternity and must be aware of that. So the question isn't so much: do you want our kids to have Chakra? But more like, are you comfortable bringing a race of Chakra wielders into the world? This is something only you can decide."

For a long minute, Tsunade remained silent, sipping at her sake and staring off into space.

"I…" she paused, gathering her thoughts before speaking again. "Civilians didn't use it. It wasn't used to build houses, roads, or to heal. It was a tool of war, and everything else was tangential. Before me, healing was a product of a few bloodlines and an extremely rare few. Chakra and the wars it led to killed my Family. It killed my comrades, fiance, brother, best friend, and surrogate son. Chakra is a tool of war."

I didn't speak, letting her decide for herself. Whatever her choice, it would determine if an entire race of beings would come into existence or not. It had been a choice I had faced as well. Just by being my children, all my kids would be extremely powerful, given enough time. While I liked that thought, I also needed to be aware that it also applied to my great great, times a thousand, grandchildren.

Who might be dicks that I don't like.

That was a burden of immortality so rarely talked about. You don't get to pretend you do not share some responsibility for future generations because you will be there to witness their fuckups.

"But," Tsunade paused, and I saw her come to a decision. "But it has so much potential. To heal. To create. Yes, my descendants might do terrible things with Chakra, but I will be there to help them. To guide them. And if I am not, then my children will be. That is why I want a child in the first place. Something that will outlast me. I do not want to be the last Senju anymore. The one that lives while others die. With Warranty Plan, I will outlive you. I want somebody to outlive me. So let's give them Chakra and trust our children."

"Okay," I nodded with a soft smile and a peck on her lips. Just a light touch, as the last part was to come. "The final thing we need to talk about isn't a choice you need to make but the reason why we've waited so long."

"You wanted Amelia available," Tsunade said. "Did you want a second opinion on the child?"

“No,” I shook my head. “I trust your medical judgement more than hers, biomancy be damned. It’s because I will need her help to recraft my Avatar. Tomorrow morning, after we’re done here, I will kill myself.”

She flicked me on the forehead. Hard.

Hard enough that my spinal column shattered and my skull dented. Only her weight on my lap kept me from flying over the back of the couch. And possibly through it.

“Ow.” I deadpanned as my spine realigned and my face stopped looking like a bowl. A quick spell cleaned up the mess of fluids, flesh, and bone matter.

“You’re lucky I know how much you fear death,” she scowled harshly at me. “I know that isn’t really what will happen, despite your need to be dramatic.” Despite that, she still gave me a withering look. “But don’t joke about something like that.”

“I am not joking,” I said, rubbing my forehead in phantom pain. When I saw her finger rise again, I hurried to explain. “I need to die. Or at least as close to it as I can come without actually dying.”

“Explain.” She ordered, and I was compelled to follow. I was okay with this one since I had planned on explaining anyway.

“Okay, this story is a bit long and complicated, but I will boil it down as simply as possible. It has to do with my time in Bloodborne.”

“That you don’t talk about,” she said archly, sipping at her sake again. I took it as a good sign.

“It’s not so much I don’t *want* to discuss it. There is nothing particular to say as it is,” I shrugged. “I was only there for a few months. It was practically a work shift compared to my time in other worlds. Did I kill a bunch of mutated abominations? Yep, a whole lot of them, but the total kill count was way lower than the other worlds simply due to time, even if they were more densely packed.”

I wasn’t even lying. I was a monster to the people of that world. I had torched an entire city, and most of it’s inhabitants in my rage and fear, yet I had done the right thing.

There was no cure to the plague or the old blood. All you could do was purge the infected.

And the hundreds of thousands I killed?

Barely a hill on the mountain of corpses I’ve left behind in my travels.

“So you say,” she snorted but waved at me to continue. I appreciated the efforts they went to to avoid giving me orders.

“Anyway, it has less to do with my time there and more to do with the nature as a Great One stemming from that particular place.” How do you explain all the Miyazaki and Fromsoft *LORE* simply? “I won’t get too deep into it, but one of the game’s central themes

was children. Mothers, pregnancy, babies and childbirth. That sort of thing. And not just among humans. In fact, the entire plot of the game could be boiled down to a story about various Old Ones trying to have kids. Reductive, but technically true."

"Mikael," Tsuande stopped me with a hand. "You're rambling."

"Right," I took a deep breath. "I am a Great One of Bloodborne, specifically. For a bunch of reasons, such as power, paranoia, completionist tendencies, and sheer usefulness, I chose to become one rather than pursue the other endings of the game. But Bloodborne Great Ones have their quirks. Usually, there is so little difference between it and other Cthulhu Mythos Great Ones. With one difference. Children. Every Great One loses their child."

"When you say they lose their child…" Tsunade asked leadingly as it began to dawn on her what I was saying.

"I mean they die. All of them," I said seriously. "Stillbirth. Murder. Miscarriage. You name it. Something inevitably goes wrong, and the child dies. This makes us desperate, and we seek surrogates to fill the hole of the lost child. The entire game is caused by this. It is almost curse-like. Infinite power in exchange for never getting children."

"Shouldn't the Catalogue protect you from that type of thing," she asked with a frown, a hand unconsciously going to her navel.

"I really, really hope it does," I admitted, letting my true feelings flow in the desperation of my voice. "But just like I am not willing to entrust your lives to Warranty Plan, I am also not willing to take a risk on this. The Catalogue Defenses also have a bit of a weakness regarding things we do to ourselves. By their very nature, The Company is a higher order of beings than Great Ones, so it should still cover it, but I am Black Marked by them, so any future involvement, like Warranty Plan, is suspect. I am hedging my bets as much as possible. With my luck, that's the only reason I've lasted this long."

"And how does 'killing yourself.'" She made finger quotes with her words, but her scowl told me exactly how much she disliked the idea. "Help you."

"Basically, I am trying for the only loophole I know of," I shrugged. "There is no actual limit on the number of Great Ones. It is just that natural Great One children will die. I need to ensure any children of mine do not contain any Great One traits with Designer Babies. Then, I will use my true body to destroy my Great One Avatar utterly, leaving not a part of me behind. I won't recreate it for a few days or so while the sperm and the egg mix. I will do the same when the child is to be born. This way, there will be zero Great Ones to influence the child during its most important stages of development. Of course, after I do this, I will need Amelia to reform my human body, as my avatars will need to be remade."

“That is needlessly complicated,” Tsunade scowled. “Can’t you just stop being a Great One entirely? You’d give up power in your Avatars, but your main body is stronger anyway. You can just have your avatars be human.”

“Can you stop being human because you want to?” I asked rhetorically. When she didn’t seem contented by my words, I explained with a sigh. “Look. I have been a Great One for over thirty million years. Compared to that, I was only human, or humanoid as the case may be, for a few thousand years. I think as an Eldritch abomination, not as human. More than that, I physically cannot undo what I have done to myself. You cannot change who or what you are on a dime. This isn’t just changing my race. I can do that easily, given enough time. This would be cutting off sections of myself, literally lobotomizing me in body, soul, and mind. Only, unlike Valeria’s situation, I wouldn’t be able to recover.”

“Why not?” Tsunade asked with a frown. “I’ve seen you heal from brain trauma before. You just did.”

“Because my time as a Great One was the time I spent with you all on the Island, even if you didn’t know I was there,” I explained simply. “If I cut off that entire section of my mind and being, which I am not even sure how to do, all I will have is memories of my time in my prison. Thirty or so years with Melina. Less than that with Ranni. And a bunch of half-forgotten conversations, spread out over years, with the rest of you. I’d be the man who had to force himself to trust you. Who loved you but didn’t have the context for the emotions, eternally wondering if I was being controlled. Our relationship would not survive that. I probably wouldn’t survive that.”

“I see,” Tsunade sighed.

I felt bad as I had been killing the mood thoroughly this entire time, but she needed to be aware of this.

These would be my first children and would set the bar for all that followed. If everything worked out perfectly, and I was just being my usual paranoid self, I’d be thrilled and able to relax a bit later. But I did not want to risk Tsunade going in blind. It might worry her more than necessary if it turned out to be nothing, but she needed to know the risk.

I didn’t want to see what would become of her if she lost a child. It would kill her just as surely as if I destroyed her myself.

I firmly believed communication was crucial for a long, healthy relationship, and I intended for our relationship to last a very long time.

“Do you still want to do this?” I asked, keeping my voice neutral so she couldn’t discern which way I leaned. This was her choice to make. “We are in no rush. We can wait months, years, eons even before I have children.”

“But until we do, we won’t know if this ‘curse’ of yours is active,” Tsunade scowled as she downed the entirety of the remaining sake bottle. “And if it is, I am the best one to have the first kids. I am a Dragon of Life, after all, on top of being a medic. I’d be the first to know if something goes wrong.”

“I’ll admit to having taken that into consideration.” My voice was still plain and level. “The other major factor was you were the first to ever express a desire for children.”

“Do you know why I did that?”

“You never said it explicitly.” I had some ideas but didn’t want to put words in her mouth.

“Because I spent too long waiting.” Tsunade stared down into the empty bottle. “I waited too long with Dan. With Jiraya. I am not going to wait anymore.”

She threw the bottle over her shoulder, shattering it against the wall.

I paid it no attention, as I found my hands full of a curvaceous blonde trying to suck the semen out of me through my mouth.

Arousal and joy shot through me in equal measure at her response.

“I am going to worry about all this later,” Tsunade panted as she separated her lips from mine. “Right now, I want you to fuck babies into me.”

Her enormous breasts pressed into my chest as her hips gyrated against me.

Did I say I killed the mood? We were both Dragons of Life, so some casual necromancy is fine.

… That was bad, and I feel bad.

“Did you know one good thing about being a Great One, on top of a Dragon of Life?” I asked rhetorically. I tore her shirt from her body, leaving her in a black lacy brazier that hid absolutely nothing as it strained to keep her prodigious bosom contained. Pale flesh and pink nipples were visible despite the intricate pasterns covering them. “I have the biggest breeding kink possible. And I am going to take that all out on you.”

Tsunade moaned at the thought and dove for another kiss as my hands hefted her breasts, enjoying their weight.

It hadn’t always been my kink, even if I hadn’t opposed the idea. My Life Element, combined with the inherent desires of a Great One, magnified that desire and made it so attractive to me that I had to physically restrain myself from putting a kid or seven in every one of my wives every time we had sex.

My self-control, real-life logistics, and fear of the potential complications caused by my Great One status had stopped me so far.

Not anymore.

“You’re still doing a lot of talking,” she said, voice breathy with desire. “And very

little breeding."

Despite Tsunade's words, Sticky Fingers told me exactly how much my dirty talk was turning her on.

I slid my hands under her bra, fingers clamping on pebbled nipples and pinching.

"You can't wait, can you?" I asked rhetorically, keeping my voice calm despite my own arousal. One of my favourite tactics, and a surefire way to maintain control, was not letting my partner know exactly how horny I was. I pinched harder for an instant, then released my fingers. My hands grasped her breasts and squeezed as I rhythmically pulled them forward. We both knew what my actions mirrored, and the blonde moaned again at the idea. "You can't wait till these are filled with milk, can you? Till I can milk you properly."

"No," the former Hokage tried to gain some control, seizing my lips as her hand dove below my pants to grab my dick and start pumping it. Her own hips got in the way as she sawed back and forth against my waist. "I can't. Now fuck me!"

I didn't. Not yet.

My newfound pregnancy kink didn't interfere with my original desire for control and sadism. And Tsunade's unravelling was far too beautiful in my eyes.

I left one hand to continue to milk her breast as the other left to sensually slide between them and down to her navel. I stopped it before it reached her bucking hip, getting a furious look and twitch of her waist as she tried to force my hand down by contorting her body. I held her down with one hand pressing into her flesh above her womb.

Tsunade groaned in frustration.

"They'll get bigger, you know," I said conversationally, talking about things she already knew as a medic but putting them in a more arousing context. "Your breasts will swell with milk. Your hips will widen in preparation. Your ass will grow from the new position and extra pounds. All of it. You'll go from curvy short stack to porn star milf. A sex object designed only to get fucked, get pregnant, and give birth. Then repeat. Over and over again. I'll fill you with child after child. You said you were fine with being the mother of a race, right? Well, a race needs multiple ancestors to spread quickly. And you'll give birth to every one of them. I wonder just how big you'll get?"

Tsunade tore my pants off me, shredding the fabric with a growl. Her bottoms didn't last for longer than an eye blink as she ripped a hole in the tight material right over her pussy. She impaled herself with my dick with vicious desire, letting out a teeth-rattling moan as I… bottomed out?

There was no other way to describe it. Tsunade was short despite her outrageous

proportions. She wasn't the smallest of the Family at 5" 4', but I was still over a foot taller than her. Despite that, I had never expected to smash into her womb's entrance.

This wasn't the first time we had sex, and she, like most of the more petite women, was a snug, warm fit. Sticky Fingers ensured that there would be no pain or damage from sex, no matter what we did, but it didn't actively change her biology.

Unless she wanted it to.

I grinned a shark's grin.

"I can feel it," I whispered/growled in her ear. For emphasis, I lifted her by her pillowy ass and smashed her down again. My dick hit a soft, spongy wall. "I can feel how hungry your womb is." I battered it again, harder. "It's trying to suck me in."

She silenced me with a kiss, shoving her tongue down my throat.

I slammed myself over and over again into her, the force rocking the loveseat along the floor. Our hips met in wet 'splats' as her arousal spread.

My hands were everywhere. Squeezing her marvellous mammaries. Cupping her amazing ass. Grasping her thick thighs. Everywhere and anywhere I could get my hands on, I did.

Inevitably one of my hands stopped on her huge tits, grasping and kneading the breast roughly as she moaned into my mouth. The heft, the weight, and the knowledge that they'd be full of milk soon drove me crazy.

My other hand grasped her doughy ass cheeks, spanking and playing with them as they bounced in rhythm to our dance. Tsunade was fit, don't get me wrong, but there was a plumpness to her that was missing in my other wives. Age, maybe? Either way, the wet slaps of our rutting was accompanied by the claps of her ass bouncing in my lap.

But it wasn't enough.

I was too wound up, too taken with the idea that I could finally let loose.

My Great One aspect was desirous of offspring.

My Dragon aspect was thrilled that we were making Life.

My human, perverted mind was taken with the debauchery of it all.

Despite creating children being the exact reason sex existed in the first place, the idea of having sex explicitly for procreation just seemed… perverted. Taboo.

We weren't missionary style in the dark, but the idea that *I* would do something the *right* way seemed… wrong somehow.

All that combined turned me on in a way I had never been before.

I picked up the short stack milf by her ass, supple cheeks pillowing around my fingers as I stood.

Disconnecting from her lips, both pairs, I tore the wet scraps of her tight pants from

her body, leaving her only in a bra pushed below and sinking into her breasts, framing them for my pleasure.

"Get back in there and do your job," Tsunade growled with a glare.

I turned her, facing her away from me and pushing her head down as I held her waist with one hand. Tsunade was forced to reach out and grab the back of the loveseat.

The former Hokage hung there, arms extended and facing the ground, her blonde hair hiding her face.

Her breasts hung pendulously, swaying hypnotically with every movement of her body.

I plunged back into her with a cry of frustrated relief, letting her legs fall. They were too short to touch the ground. The blonde was supported only by her upper body strength and my dick.

I grabbed her waist with one hand, the other going to the bouncing globs of flesh that captivated me.

And I went to town on her.

SLAM. SLAM.

I pounded her with the force of a thousand bulls. Every smash of my hips against hers sent her tits bouncing, her ass flesh wobbling and forced the loveseat further and further along the floor until it was pressed against the wall. I battered down the walls of her womb as if its existence personally offended me.

And as I did, I talked.

"I'm going to fuck a baby into you."

SLAM.

"Imagine if your child could see his slut of a mother."

SLAM.

"Once you're pregnant, I won't be able to hold myself back. I'm going to have you ride my dick every morning. You will wake me up with a milky breast in my mouth. Then you're going park that fat ass on my lap and bounce on my dick for hours. When I get tired, you'll put that mouth to work. The only thing I will allow you to wear is lingerie that shows off your fat, pregnant belly."

SLAM. SLAM. SLAM. SLAM. SLAM.

Over and over, I whispered the crudest, most perverted thoughts that came to my mind in her ear. Things I would never actually do, but the taboo nature of which tingled the mind. I spoke of getting her pregnant again in front of the children. Of impregnating the entire family all at once and having an orgy.

I narrated how long we had and the hundreds, thousands of my children she'd given

birth to over the eons. I taunted her with the idea of finding a world like her original, of going there and doing nothing but creating a whole new Senju Clan from scratch, just the two of us.

No matter what I said, what depraved and vile fantasies I spoke, Tsunade kept her silence but for moans and groans of pleasure. I knew it turned her on. The fluttering of her muscles, the clenching of her hungry cunt, and the way she bit her lips to stop from crying out all told me that she, like me, had never been more aroused in her life.

But she never engaged with it.

Years of dealing with Jiraiya had taught her that a pervert would latch on to anything. Those fantasies should be kept secret and safe, away from other people.

Like most people, Tsunade enjoyed sex and the perversions and pleasures it could bring.

But she could not voice it. Not speak the deviant wishes or fantasies that came to her mind.

But then I said the magic words.

Softly.

Kindly.

With no hint of my previous perverted tone.

"You're about to be a mom."

Tsunade *broke*.

"Fuck me, you big dicked bastard," she shouted, the speed of her hips bouncing increasing, showing how much upper body strength she really had. "Fuck me. Creampie me. Get those fucking swimmers in me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me fuck me fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK ME!!!"

I grinned, doubling my pace as one hand gripped her hair and pulled.

"Get me pregnant, you perverted son of a bitch," she ordered, her eyes meeting mine now that her vision was free of hair. She knew what she was saying, knew that I couldn't disobey. "Fuck a baby into me. Two babies. You wanna fuck me pregnant? Then stop pussy footting around and FUCK ME!"

"You don't get to call me a pervert, you slut," I spanked her ass, sending the cheeks wobbling. "You're just as much a pervert as me."

"Because you made me," Tsunade gasped at the sting of pain. "Because you and Yoruichi are deviants. Because it feels so good. Because, because, because…"

"Because you want this," I interrupted her panting words. "Because you want nothing more than to be my little breeding bitch. Because you wanna be knocked up like some little kunoichi slut, ready to pump out child after child on my command."

I said it. The dark, unspoken aspect of the Naruto world. Rape. Forced breeding. It wasn't a focus of the manga, but it was there.

Both Naruto's mother and his wife had been kidnapped for that express purpose at one point in their lives.

It was something all Kunoichi had to be aware of.

Tsunade, a veteran of two Shinobi World wars, had probably known people who suffered that fate.

"YEESSSSSS!" Tsunade howled in pleasure. "Rape a baby into me. Make me give birth to your bastard, then rape me again. Break me on your dick. Make me forget about my home until all I care about is cumming over and over again."

Sometimes, that's how fetishes work. The thing you absolutely don't want to happen that you fear more than anything can be a turn-on with a trusted companion. The fear turns to excitement, which turns to arousal.

I didn't tolerate rape. I hated it.

But roleplay between two consenting adults? That I could do.

"You say that like you have a choice," I snarled, tightening my fist in her hair and yanking her even further back as I continued to slam into her womb. Over and over again, I pumped.

"I don't," Tsunade gasped, shuddering. "I don't have a choice. I'm the strongest Kunoichi to ever live, and you're raping me. You're going to fuck a baby into me, and I don't have any way to stop you."

The wall loosened, and my dick slammed through the barrier.

Without sex magic, it would have been debilitating.

With sex magic?

My dick felt like it was squeezed through a too-tight tube. A vice-like clamp captured my head, not letting it go until it released its precious cargo.

Then it got worse.

She froze as I slammed through the walls that protected Tsunade's most sacred place. Eyes wide in disbelief.

Then she screamed.

She shouted loud enough to shake the building as she came.

"GIVE ME YOUR BABIES!"

Her entire body spasmed in orgasm, taking my dick for a wild ride. Her cunt undulated, vibrated, and clenched as she squirted her release against my groin.

But her womb wouldn't let me go.

It was too much. The fantasies, the dirty talk, the lewdness of Tsunade's plump body,

the tightness of her cunt and the realization of what I was about to do all hit me in a tidal wave of arousal and pleasure.

It was all too much.

I came, flooding the hungry void with my semen as it desperately clamped down around my dick, unwilling to let even a drop out of the tight womb.

I could see it in my mind, a sense that didn't belong to a human. I ensured the result, twin sons, and I let myself drown in the moment's pleasure.

I was going to be a father.

******

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"I'm coming," Amy grumbled as she made her way to the door of her new condo. The old one wasn't safe now that people knew she was alive, and she needed an extra room.

"Who is it?" Victoria asked, looking up from her phone as she scrolled through PHO while eating breakfast.

Amy looked through the peephole but saw no one. Focusing slightly, she tried to use her new Kryptonian senses to detect anything.

She immediately stopped when the sounds and smells of the world slammed into her. She needed much more practice with that before it would be useful.

Reeling from the vertigo of the shock to her senses, Amy decided that if someone out there was going to try to kill her, she would let them.

She had only had six cups of coffee so far, nowhere near enough to deal with a headache. She still had to unpack later.

Opening the door, the biokinetic was not faced with an ambush or, worse yet, evangelists but with a mutant squid baby.

"Mornin'," Mikael said casually, holding up a stubby tentacle in greeting.

"Boss?" Victoria asked from behind Amy. "BOSS!!" She shouted as she caught sight of the tiny abomination of nature. Diving forward, Victoria wrapped the monstrosity in her arms and cuddled her cheeks against it. "You're so CUTE!!"

"What are you doing here?" Amy asked, rubbing her fingers against her temples. "Didn't I JUST make you a new body last week?"

"You did," Mikael nodded, not paying any mind to the 'squeeing' girl cuddling him. "But then I fucked myself to death, and now I need a new one."

Would you look at that?

The headache got worse..

Author's Note:

This Side Story does contain lewdness. You are not required to read it to gain the full measure of the story if you are not interested, as I know it isn't everyone's cup of tea.

That being said, I strongly encourage everyone to read at least the first half, three thousand words or so, as it contains points and character moments that will make the latter parts of the fic clearer. Especially if you haven't played Bloodborne. It is really obvious when the smexy stuff starts, so you can scroll past it to the end from there.

I hope you all enjoy.

When I think of Tsunade, in this fic and in Naruto in general, I always have this conflicting image of her. At once, a matronly figure, intolerant of perversions and serious to a fault. She was the strongest Kunoichi to ever live and a role model to women everywhere in her world. But I also see the crude, rambunctious drinker. The girl who stole her grandfather's sake as a child, who played pranks, gambled, and drank. The legendary sucker who frequented bars and seedy parts of the world.

I tried to portray both aspects, as well as her trauma and desires, in this chapter.

On the subject of Bloodborne, so much of it revolves around childhood and children that I cannot imagine Mikael, with his paranoia and pessimism, not taking any precaution he can since he is a Great One.

I hope you enjoyed it and will see you all next week for part 4 of Consequences.

CONSEQUENCES IV

"The universe is asymmetric, and I am persuaded that life, as it is known to us, is a direct result of the asymmetry of the universe or of its indirect consequences."
-Louis Pasteur

"There has been no reaction from Madelyne or Nathan," Xavier told Batman. "Nothing to indicate external psychic influences or even powers."

Batman's projected face frowned.

"I don't believe in coincidences," the Caped Crusader said gravely. "Pryor's resemblance to Jean Grey and her timely appearance were always suspicious. Especially since she is immune to psychics. Now, only a few days after the birth of her son, the Phoenix returns?"

"Some things are coincidences," the leader of the X-men felt the need to point out. "That is just the nature of our world. Too much happens at once for the occasional accident not to happen."

"I would rather be proven wrong about a coincidence than miss a pattern."

"Are we sure Earth is its goal?"

"We do not know for sure," Batman shook his head. "Captain Marvel just spoke of the Phoenix shifting its path towards Earth. It has been causing the Lantern Corps grief for months, rampaging around space without a set destination. This is the first time it has headed in one direction for long. We must assume Earth, or someone on it, is its current target."

The man's paranoia was well known to Xavier, and it had been fuelled further by the many times he had been proven right. Still, Madelyn had been good for Scott, and the paraplegic desperately prayed that a newborn infant was not the target of a being on the level of the Phoenix.

He had already lost too much to the mercurial cosmic entity.

"While the X-gene is genetic," Xavier explained. "There is no proof that young Nathan is a psychic, and if he were, there are many others more powerful than a baby the Phoenix could be attracted to."

"Heartbreak triggered a wide range of psychic powers. Another could be attracting the Phoenix, looking for a new host," Batman conceded. "But Madelyn's genetic makeup is almost exactly that of Grey's. Heartbreak affected not just adult humans but everything. Many with latent X-genes developed powers in its wake. It is not impossible Pryor did as well and isn't aware of it. Or the child. There have been more and more mutants

awakening young. Yesterday, a three-year-old demonstrated pyrokinetic powers in Amsterdam."

"Nathan was a day old," Charles insisted.

"The Phoenix bonded to Grey when she was young," Batman countered. "It doesn't care for age. Just suitability. And it might prefer a host it can mould."

"I will not rip a newborn baby from its parents because of supposition and paranoia," Xavier said with a glare.

"I am not asking you to," Batman said gravely. "I am merely communicating the risk you and your people are under if we cannot stop the Phoenix from arriving. Grey nearly tore the planet apart before she died. We cannot take chances with something so powerful. Have your team physically and mentally ready if the worst should happen. That is all."

"You admitted that other psychics or Masters have risen in the wake of Heartbreak," Xavier tried a different tactic. "Could they not be it's goal? Or the Elden Lord itself? It, too, might have felt his influence and been attracted to his power."

"I haven't discounted that possibility," Batman usually gave little away beside his habitual scowl, but Charles noticed a tightness of his eyes. "If the Elden Lord is the goal, we must stop it. Imagine the destruction of the Dark Phoenix with the Dragon's body. It would be the end of all life in the universe. Completely unstoppable."

Charles grimaced as his fingers drummed on the handle of his wheelchair. His interaction with the Elden Lord hadn't been on the best terms, even if he was genuinely happy for Amelia. He also acknowledged the Family's aid in defending the world.

They were united. No more discrimination. No more hatred. Mutants and humans stood as one in peace and Love.

Something about Mikael, the charismatic manipulation of others, the casual way he used people, rubbed the X-man the wrong way. Charles didn't dislike the man. He just found himself wary of the blatant cruelty and threat of violence he posed.

However, Charles was self-aware enough to acknowledge his own bias and gave the Elden Lord some leeway because of it.

He, unlike everyone else on Earth, hadn't been healed. Because the wound that prevented him from walking was spiritual rather than physical, his legs remained unresponsive.

As far as he knew, Charles Xavier was the last man in a wheelchair on the planet.

"What of his wives," Charles asked. "There is a psychic among them. Do we know who she is? Could the Phoenix be here for her?"

"It is possible, but that would be just as bad as the Elden Lord himself. He would never agree to fight his wives and might even aid one in absorbing the Phoenix as he did

with Trigon. He will do what he can to protect them, but if they become the Dark Phoenix, he will side with her over us. As for who it is? Of the currently known consorts, 'Melina' and 'Priscilla' are the ones we know the least about, save that they were from his 'conquered' worlds. The latter somehow managed to slay Tohu, while the former is a magic user. Neither precludes them from telepathy or similar abilities."

"So we cannot involve him or his family," Charles acknowledged with a tired sigh. "Even if they could help, the risk would be too great. It would be better if they never learned of the Phoenix's proximity."

"We have a plan," Batman nodded. "One that doesn't require your team, uses the least psychically susceptible personnel, and will hopefully deter it from approaching Earth. Killing it is impossible, but we know more about it now than when dealing with Grey. It retreats to recover if it suffers enough damage to its physical form. I have also sent a message to the Shi'ar, as they are vested in preventing it from rampaging. I am still waiting for a response. This is not like the Elden Lord's arrival. We know what we are dealing with."

"Have you considered finding a host we can trust?" Charles asked, knowing the man had but wanting to know if he had ideas.

"I would not trust anyone with that power. Especially since its last host led to the creation of the Dark Phoenix. Strange's records indicate it should be an emotionless being. A force of nature. It was anything but while possessing Grey. We do not know how that will affect its hosts going forward. I would consult Nabu if possible. He's dealt with the Phoenix in the past, but…"

"The Elden Lord still hasn't returned the Helm of Fate," Xavier sighed.

On one hand, the mutant balked at the idea of the Dragon keeping a Lord of Order essentially trapped at his leisure. A part of him wanted his X-men to mount a rescue of the item, return it to Kent Nelson, and have Dr. Fate resume duties.

Another part of him, the human who had lost students and friends in Heartbreak, felt it was only justified for Nabu to be punished for his blatant disregard for humanity.

He had cared more about stopping the Elden Lord with the Gods than with the good he could do in battling the Endbringers. He had participated in a plan that had prevented some of the Earth's most significant assets from coming to the rescue.

Millions more would have survived if the Elden Lord, his entire Family, and Wonder Woman had been free to aid the Earth.

"Richards, Parker, Stark, Dragon, and I have been working on a defence force for the Phoenix for years," Batman said gravely. Charles knew this was Bruce's way of 'reassuring' his comrades. "All I ask is for your team to keep the pair contained until the danger has

passed. There is a good chance they are not involved. But I won't risk it."

"I have a psychic dampening chamber I use for some of my more sensitive students," Charles sighed in defeat. "We'll move the pair there. Scott is always with them, but I will have the others on high alert. They won't like it, but you are right. We cannot take chances."

"Sorry." Batman didn't sound repentant, but Charles knew the man behind the mask. More than anyone else, Bruce Wayne knew the cost of keeping the world safe. He never asked anyone to pay what he didn't pay himself.

"It will take their mind off of… the others."

Sean. Megan. Jesse. Warren.

So many had died on Heartbreak.

The X-men had been lucky to lose only four members.

Yet the number of students Charles Xavier buried grew with every year. Even with Scott taking on more leadership duties and his focus turning to teaching, the original leader of the X-man felt every loss.

And now the Phoenix, the greatest disaster his team had ever faced, was returning.

A nightmare that had torn his original class apart.

For all his life, Charles Xavier wished for peace.

Only in recent years had he come to understand he would never have peace so long as he lived.

All Charles Xavier could do was to fight ever on and hopefully leave the world a little better for his students.

That was the simple truth of a world like theirs.

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Not too far from the secret and secure room Xavier used to communicate with the Illuminati, Nathan Christopher Charles Summers was rocked to sleep in his mother's arms as she hummed a quiet lullaby.

Scott Summers slumbered quietly beside her, content to let the new mother lull their child to sleep again.

Like many lullabies, the one Madelyne Pryor sang her newborn son was hauntingly beautiful, even without lyrics. Her voice rose and fell in tinkling patterns like the keys of a piano. She had always been good with music. It kept her occupied during long flights.

Chubby little fists pawed at his eyes in his sleep, and Madelyne Pryor smiled.

She was so happy.

The darkness of the world, as deep and wide as it was, couldn't hurt her, Scott and little Nathan.

Things had been touch and go for a bit early on, thanks to the complications of Heartbreak and fears about her husband fighting the Endbringers, but the Elden Lord's healing had seen to everyone's recovery.

Just to be sure, Madelyne had used one of her healing vials on herself and her son, strengthening the pair with the red liquid.

She hadn't told Scott, of course. She didn't want to worry him when he had so much on his plate.

And everything had turned out all right.

So Madelyne Pryor hummed a tinkling lullaby to her son as sleep claimed them both.

Her last conscious thought for the night was an idle wondering where she had first heard the song and who Mergo was.

Then sleep, like a dark ocean, claimed her.

******

"In my experience, sons are worse in the beginning," Medea recounted with a fond smile. "They'll drive you to Hades and back from the age of two to twenty-five. So much energy, so many hormones. You can't take your eyes off them for a second, or they'll smash every amphora in the building. Daughters are better in that way. They still have their own issues, but they learn by imitating you when they are young, so expect them to follow you around more, making watching them easier."

They had just finished the first Family dinner after Mikael had recreated his body. It had been an excuse they needed to all come together as they had been swamped since Heartbreak and a Family get-together had been just what they needed.

Unsurprisingly, the topic had shifted to children thanks to Tsunade's pregnancy and more than a bit of ribbing at the blonde's expense.

"Indeed," Scathach nodded in agreement as she downed her fifteenth mug of ale. "Uathach was much like me as a child. She was gifted and eager to learn. Whether the spear, spells or the Way of Thighs. She took more towards the latter as she grew. The number of my students that fell for her…" The Celtic heroine chuckled as she shook her head. "Too much like my sister sometimes."

"Starting from around ten to twelve," Medea continued with a flushed chuckle. She also had downed more than a few cups of Scathach's special brew. "It's your daughters you need to watch out for. They have just as many hormones as the boys, and the trouble they

get into will be worse than some broken furniture, but by then, they'll be getting good at hiding it. My aunt used to say that men fought wars with dicks and weapons, while women fight with subtly and words." Medea paused, remembering the rest of her aunt's advice. "And dicks. My aunt believed any girl could lead any man around with a wiggle of hips."

"I appreciate the advice," Tsunade smirked as she sipped her drink slowly to break down the alcohol before it entered her bloodstream. "But I don't think I will take child-rearing advice from Circe."

"She was great with kids," Medea hurried to defend her aunt.

"I'm sure she was," the former Hokage chuckled. "But they're going to be sons, not daughters, and I don't think she has much wisdom on that subject."

"And don't forget that our situation is different," Robin chimed in with her own laugh.

The cheer around the group was infectious as the alcohol flowed, yet Melina found herself sipping her drink quietly, unsure what to do with herself.

"Them having multiple mothers will not be too odd," Medea waived off the concern. "I grew up with six mothers. Well, my father was more a 'booty call' for Hecate than anything else, so only five. Mostly, it was a boon, as I always had someone to turn to when the others were busy."

"While that is a factor I had considered," Robin acknowledged as she shook her head. "I was actually talking about Mikael."

"What about him?" Tsunade asked as the women around the dining table turned to look at the man they had come to love.

He was locked in a serious discussion with Ranni, Artoria, Priscilla and Glynda, all five heads bowed together as they spoke in hushed tones.

The seriousness on their faces opposed the fact that they were currently arguing over which clothes would make babies look cuter.

Ranni was arguing for articles of clothing 'befitting their station,' Artoria was urging clothes that were 'practical,' and Glynda was claiming that they should be clothed in regular baby clothes to prevent alienation from other children they would be introduced to.

Priscilla kept insisting on fur as she knocked back tankard after tankard of Seigbrau.

Mikael, perhaps unsurprisingly, was arguing for pyjamas costumes.

Melina would forever deny the idea that her Lord's child, dressed in a dragon onesie and breathing flames, was the greatest image she had ever conceived of.

It wouldn't do to tell him she agreed with him and further his ego.

"What sort of father do you expect him to be?" Robin answered Tsunade's question

with one of her own.

Tsunade almost answered reflexively but then closed her mouth with a click.

“Oh dear,” Medea murmured, the flush on her cheeks deepening as a silly smile spread. “You are correct. I… honestly do not know how that will affect things. I loved my father, but he wasn’t very present. Too concerned with ruling the country and other affairs.”

“It is my understanding that very few of us have experience with present fathers, or at least good ones,” Robin explained.

Melina put together the list in her mind.

From what she knew about her Lord’s consorts, their experience with paternal figures ranged from nonexistent, like herself, Robin, Diana, and Artoria, to bad, such as Yoruichi’s and Ranni’s. Some could only be considered as ‘HELL NO’ like Emma’s, Priscilla’s and Raven’s.

The only women who knew and had relatively decent relationships with their dads were Medea, Scathach, whose father had minimal effect on her life, and Glynda, whose father had been a civilian whom she rarely interacted with after she started training to be a huntress, and Tsunade’s.

Comparing what she knew of her Lord to those experiences…

“They’re going to have him wrapped around their fingers,” Tsunade groaned with a slump, but her face had a fond smile.

“He’s going to act like Isshin,” Yoruichi giggled. Nobody else knew who that was, so she explained at their look. “A huge dork. Gave his daughters everything they wanted.”

“You made a good call to have sons first,” Diana said seriously, but the crinkle of her eyes gave away her inner laughter. “If his first child was a daughter, can you imagine how protective he would be?”

The group collectively shuddered at the idea.

“She wouldn’t even know men were a thing until she was thirty,” Yoruichi said with horror. “A complete daddy’s girl.”

“Thirty thousand,” Robin corrected with a giggle.

“Oh god,” Medea groaned with a slump of her shoulders. “What if they inherit his sense of humour?”

All the women shared horrified looks.

Except for Diana, whose good humour faded and resignation filled her face.

“When I visited my mother today,” she told the group with despair in her voice as she stared vacantly into space. “She said she was having an ‘amazoning’ day.”

There was a moment of silence as all those present grieved for the life lost to terrible

puns.

“So we all agree he’s never allowed to talk to his children, right?” Medea asked, a wild look in her eyes.

“I think he would have opinions about that,” Robin laughed.

“Telling Mikael not to do something is a surefire way to get him to do it,” Scathach agreed with a wry grin. “Except if that’s what you want. Then he’ll do it anyway and find some way to spite you.”

“He is a contrarian,” Melina interjected, finally able to put forth something in the conversation.

The other women nodded with varying degrees of humour or despair.

“We will have to make a concerted effort to protect them from his influence,” Medea said gravely. Melina figured the mage was only ninety percent joking. “If we cannot stop them meeting, we must ensure that his corruption can only go so far.”

“I think it will be cute,” Robin countered. “He’s going be a great dad.”

“Watching him try and handle children will be adorable,” Medea agreed. “And he’ll work hard at it. That is not the problem. The problem is a child, a dragon, with who knows what Element, growing with Mikael as his leading male role model. I love him, but can you say he won’t curse like a drunk sailor on shore leave in front of the kid?”

“Why would cursing be a problem?” Scathach tilted her head in question.

This was one of the problems that came with having multiple members of a Family from different cultures, time periods and with different values. Every one of them would have an influence on the children’s lives, but they each would teach different things.

Ranni would try and raise the child to be a wise and strong ruler, but Yoruichi would prefer the child to be a lively prankster. Medea would be mothering and hovering, but Artoria would be distant emotionally, if not physically.

“The only way this is going to work,” Tsunade interjected firmly, also seeing the problem. Melina noticed the others quiet and listened. As the mother, her words did have significant weight. “Is if we let the child decide who it takes after.”

“Children are not good decision-makers,” Emma, primarily silent until now, pointed out.

“But they know what they like,” Tsunade countered. “They will have plenty of role models to follow, male or not. None of us are what you would call traditional female role models, either. And I am not too worried about their ability to make puns. It will be years before they have the linguistic ability to understand Mikael’s jokes. We just need to agree on basics they need to learn, and then let their curiosity drive them from there.”

“True,” Diana nodded. “We are in no rush. They will need not concern themselves

with careers or age. We need only create a base they can stand on and aid them with whatever they desire to build. If they decide they made a mistake in their path, we can simply take the time to build something new."

"I can start a basic lesson plan," Medea told the group. Then she hiccuped. "Tomorrow. It won't be needed for years, but it might be better to establish it now when we have the time rather than waiting for their birth."

"We need to be ready to throw it out, though," Robin said with a subtle smile. "We don't know how their draconic traits will manifest, if they will have Elements immediately or if there will be unique combinations with Chakra. What do we do if Tsunade doesn't give birth but lays eggs?"

There was a pause as every woman looked at the pregnant woman's still flat stomach.

"That's not going to happen," Tsunade scowled, knowing her friend was teasing her but not liking the image in her head. "I check on the progress daily, and it has shown no difference from regular mammalian development. It's not a developed fetus yet, so I cannot say if it contains extraneous features, but if it starts to develop them, or their Chakra pathways form in odd ways, I will know immediately."

"And then we'll build you a nest," Yoruichi teased. "I saw some lovely sticks in the forest. Very comfortable looking moss on them."

"Glynda and I will aid you," Emma said to Medea, not giving room for argument as she ignored the way Tsunade swatted at the grinning Yoruichi. "We are the only ones with experience with systematic education."

"I have plenty of experience teaching," Yoruichi defended herself with a raised brow as she ducked under a thrown glass. "I was the captain of my squad for years."

"Children," Emma countered. "Are much more difficult to educate than adults. A more delicate touch is required than just beating them into the ground until they learn."

"Yet combat cannot be ignored," Scathach interjected. "They must start young enough to develop good habits."

From there, the group descended into a good-natured argument on when you should start training, what to learn first, and who would teach what.

Melina tried to find some way to enter the conversation, some way she could contribute, but found no way to interject naturally. If the topic had remained on Mikael, she could have talked about that, but she found very little else she shared with the rest of the Family.

What did she have to say about children?

Melina had never been around a child once in her life.

She always faced this problem with the others of the Family.

The lack of common ground.

Nobody excluded her, but too often she found herself on the outside just because engaging others was something she had no experience with.

Unlike Ranni, who overcame the differences with the force of her personality, Melina would rather withdraw than start an argument over an opinion. If she had one in the first place.

She had spent decades with only Torrent as a company, and even when she travelled with Mikael, most of the time was spent in a spiritual form.

Melina had never made a friend in her life.

Never had sisters or comrades.

And now, when she had no purpose or common ground besides a shared lover, she floundered.

The closest she had come to making friends was Medea's aid in their efforts to keep Mikael from using his Great One abilities. And Greek witch had made no bones that she did not appreciate the kindling maiden stealing a march on her own attempts to woo the man. They had established a common ground, but it was still shaky.

Which left Melina alone most of the time.

Useless. Friendless. Purposeless.

Should she have even come back?

Would Mikael not have been better off if he had moved on from her, unburdened by a useless woman dragging him down?

"I'm heading out," Mikael's voice interrupted Melina's depressive spiral. "I shouldn't be gone long."

"Where are you going?" Yoruichi perked up from arguing that she should be the one to teach hand-to-hand because 'she was the coolest.'

"I want to check on Valeria before it gets too late," her Lord shrugged. "I've been incommunicado for a few days. Disappearing right after her begging for help is suspicious, no matter how you look at it. It was bad timing on her part, but she didn't know that. Also, now that I have my Avatar back, I want to check something."

"What are you thinking?" Tsunade asked with a frown. "And should you not bring her and her family here? Where they're safe?"

"By her own admittance, she is probably 'infected,'" Emma answered instead, using air quotes for emphasis. "She just hasn't been triggered yet. I do not want a time bomb in our home."

"She's a child," Robin pointed out with a grimace. "She shouldn't be left alone."

"She's been alone for years," Mikael answered. "I've freed her of any potential

infection, but she might have received it again since we don't know the medium it is transmitted by."

"Hath thee considered fostering the girl, my Lord?" Ranni asked as she joined the other women around the table. "She is intelligent, driven, and resourceful. Taking her as a ward would benefit thee politically with other heroes. And whilst she remains in our abode, she need not fear more infection, no matter the method of spread."

"I was more concerned with her ability to continue fooling the world about her family. If she, and thus them, disappear, there is going to be a lot of questions asked."

"I want to examine her and her family at least once," Tsunade insisted. "Just because she hasn't detected anything with her technology doesn't mean there isn't anything there."

"Me too," Medea nodded in agreement. "It might be mystical in nature. If nothing else, this psychic imprinting spell Doom used will be a fascinating study."

"I should have a look as well," Emma frowned in thought. "I only detected her abnormal state of mind when we met, but now that we know the cause, I can see if this 'infection' is a psychic control of some sort. I haven't found anything in the minds of the Supers I've scanned, but a psychic infection would make the most sense if the control is somehow triggered by emotional responses."

"All good points," Mikael cracked a grin. "I'm glad to have some leads. I hate losing the initiative to whatever is behind this. It felt too much like we were under their control, so I am happy we have something to work on."

"You had a plan as well," Scathach pointed out with her own proud grin. "Something you wanted to 'check.'"

"While I was killing time as Daddy Dragon." "Never say that again." "I tried to think of some way to lure this 'enemy' into revealing more info. If we are forced to react to them, we just need to make them *want* to act in a predictable way." Mikael explained, ignoring Tsunade's interjection.

"Feign a weakness to draw in an opponent. I like it," Scathach grinned viciously.

"I've had good teachers," Mikael said 'humbly' as he pretended to buff his nails on his shirt.

"What is your plan," Diana asked with a tilt of her head.

"Don't worry about it," Mikael shrugged, and when a fair few of the women narrowed their eyes at him, he held up his hands in surrender. "No, seriously, don't worry about it. I wasn't going to put it into practice for a while anyway, and you raised some good points. It's still shaky and has too many points of failure. I'll call it Plan… K? Yeah Plan K. The test I wanted to perform was just to see if it was viable or not."

"Do we want to know what plan K is?" Medea asked with a long-suffering sigh.

“Probably not,” Mikael said with an unrepentant shrug as the narrowed eyes turned to glares. “Plan K stands for ‘Kidnapped Kid.’”

“Sir Bard!” Priscilla gasped. “Thou would abscond with a child who has asked thee for aid?” Her cheeks were red from drink, and her tail swished in agitation as she swayed slightly.

“Of course, I am not going to kidnap Valeria. That would defeat the purpose of her keeping up the pretense,” Mikael frowned, and more than a few women sighed in relief.

Melina closed her eyes with a sigh, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I was going to kidnap her brother.”

Melina facepalmed.

She knew he’d pull something like that.

“Oh,” Priscilla frowned, unable to decide if taking a ‘dead’ child was better or worse than taking one that had asked him for help. “That’s… good?”

“While we trust your honour and know you speak in jest,” Artoria said severely as she placed a hand on the crossbreed to steady her. “We would like a better explanation of this ‘plan’ to kidnap a child.”

“We have to work off what we know,” Mikael explained. Melina knew he always tried to establish a ‘background’ rather than speak plainly. He said it was a holdover from too many ‘PowerPoint presentations.’ “And we know very little. We know it wants more Supers and wants them under its control. We know it used me to eliminate the gods or at least distract some of the stronger ones. It did this instead of using what Supers it does have, many of which can contend with the divine. Why?”

“It would tip its hand,” Scathach answered easily. Her mind was as sharp as her spear, no matter how many drinks she had. “If it uses its control overtly, those not under its sway will become suspicious. Even if infected, they aren’t controlled if they don’t receive the trigger.”

“Secrecy is its greatest asset,” Yoruichi assented in a rare moment of seriousness. “It has been methodical and discreet for decades. Control of Supers is only one of its goals. It has another one, more long term and discovery would jeopardize it. Or it would have gone all out with the Endbringers and inflicted absolute hopelessness immediately if Valeria is right about every Super being infected. Most don’t know about the energy requirements Endbringers face. So it is either waiting for more Supers, is facing a roadblock it cannot pass, or there is some trigger point it hasn’t reached.”

“Like Aizen and the Hogyoku. Or Yhwach needing time to heal and gather forces,” Mikael nodded. Melina didn’t understand the point, but Yoruichi’s face went grim. “There needs to be some reason why it has waited so long. Some barriers it cannot cross.

Something it fears or something it needs. It has power. Without it, it could not control Supers, Endbringers, and potentially the entities. But it either needs more power or something that power itself cannot gain. Probably a bit of both, or it wouldn't have needed me to distract the council of Skyfathers while it hunted down the other gods. Still, no luck finding any while I was out?"

"Though we searched high and low, my Lord," Ranni said with a tiny grimace on her doll-like face. "The only divine beings that remain on Earth are in this room."

Mikael nodded as if it was expected.

"And how does kidnapping a child figure into this?" Artoria asked, following along with the explanation but bringing Mikael back to the critical point.

"He's bait," Emma answered for Mikeal. "In my world, Franklin Richards is one of, if not THE, most powerful beings to exist. While his power waned as he grew, possibly of his own will, his abilities as a child were beyond godlike."

"In one timeline, Franklin Richards essentially created a universe," Mikael said gravely. "In another, he made Galactus HIS herald. Whatever this shadowy influence wants, if it gained control of a Super like that, it would be game over for everyone but us. The Defences protect us from being directly altered by a reality warper. But I've learned repeatedly that Defences are absolute in their exact definitions, but they don't cover everything. There are ways around anything if people are smart enough. And there are some very smart people here. Defences wouldn't stop them from putting us in a situation we cannot escape. Very few of us will be able to survive if trapped in a black hole."

"And you wished to use such a child as bait?" Tsunade asked in disbelief. "Why can't we just wake him up and have him wipe away the problem?"

"He doesn't actually have that power as far as we can tell," Raven said plainly. "Nobody does in this reality."

"Bingo!" Mikael crowed as he pointed at Raven. She fidgeted at the attention. "One of the very first things I did when I landed here, and found out it was a hero world, was to check out the greatest threats I could think of. And anyone with reality-warping power was at the top of the list. Authors use these creatures, items, or people as plot devices to retcon their mistakes or go in a different direction. I didn't find a single one. No Mad Jim Jaspers, Spectre, Cosmic Cube, or Reality Stones. Nothing."

"The Phoenix exists," Emma pointed out. "As does Wanda Maximoff."

"As does Zatanna," Diana agreed. "While classified as magic, I have seen her perform acts on par with any reality warping."

"I am not saying that warping of reality is not possible or that there are some that can do it," Mikael elaborated. "As far as I can tell, despite the sheer number of Supers in this

world, it is still in its infancy by comic standards. In the future, there might be some Supers that can do absolute bullshit. The Scarlet Witch wasn't always able to wipe mutants from the world. Powers grow and wane. Maybe these objects are out there, and I am unaware of them. But I am saying something that can warp an entire universe in scale and rewrite the rules of physics to their whim hasn't appeared. This enemy doesn't have control of something or someone like that. Yet."

"Even if the child doesn't have the power if the enemy believes it does, it will be forced to act," Scathach nodded.

"Exactly!"

Melina enjoyed seeing Mikael so animated. It was rare, but he flourished when presented with a mental or physical challenge that he couldn't just brush off. The greater the adversity, the more he rose to overcome it.

"Whether an army of Supers is the goal or just another step to achieving a different goal, if one of its minions could rewrite reality at will, it will aid tremendously no matter its goal. Some creatures resist reality warping like we do with Defences, but that doesn't change the benefits it would grant. They could turn every human on the planet into a Super with the snap of a finger and inflict despair, thus their control, with the snap of another. Or, and this will be their real fear, it will be able to undo all their effort of decades with the same amount of effort."

"So we spread the word of a reality warper," Diana proposed. "It doesn't need to be Franklin Richards. Medea has a host of fake bodies we can use from the early experiments with your Avatar, does she not?"

"It needs to be believable," Medea countered, deep in thought. She glowed slightly as she used magic to flush the alcohol from her system. "If I make a homunculus and we pretend some child on the street, or previously unknown Super, suddenly gains godlike powers, the enemy will not take the bait. They are cautious and patient. They will smell a trap. It also can't be one of us, or it will raise the question of why we did not use such power before."

"By using a child of well-known Supers, we establish a pedigree," Tsunade said with a scowl. It looked like she agreed the plan was sound but didn't like it. "It was a common tactic from the war. Used some Bloodline holders as bait for enemies."

"And there is a very convenient child who is currently unconscious and whose family is not able to counter the story," Robin nodded, also seeing the point of the plan. "That family is known to have defeated, or at least stopped, some of the most powerful creatures to exist in this reality."

"But why kidnap the child?" Priscilla asked, drunkenly petting Artoria on the head as

if she were the cat.

Medea took exception to this and flapped her tiny wings to launch herself into the crossbreed's chest. It was almost enough to send them to the ground.

"If the bait works, I want to lure this enemy onto the Island," Mikael explained. "So we can go all out without fear of collateral. It won't actually be a kidnapping. We'll frame it as 'training to control his immense powers' to the media to spread the story."

"I meant, why must thee take the child at all? Can we not and just say we did?" Knowing her guilt, Priscilla paid the appropriate tribute to the Floofiest of Floofs, petting it as she spoke slowly. As if every word took great thought.

"We don't know if it has some way to monitor the location of the people infected," Medea pointed out. "We don't have any concrete grasp on their powers. All we know is they are powerful, cunning, have the advantage in information and are malevolent. We need to be thrice as cunning if we want to make up for our ignorance."

"Anyway," Mikael shook his head. "We got sidetracked. It's plan K for a reason. Until we know more about this 'infection' and its mode of spread, we can't lay out the bait. Otherwise, it will send Supers to attack instead of coming itself."

"It might still be worth it," Emma pointed out. "If it does, we'll be able to deprive it of tools by 'freeing' its pawns. We'll gain allies. Even if they are 'infected' again, without the emotional trigger, they will not be controlled again."

"We'd win a battle but lose the war," Artoria shook her head. "Bait only works so long. If this foe is as cunning as we believe, after only a few of its assets fall, it will realize its failure and know we are on to it. It will also compromise young Valeria's position."

"Plan K," Mikael repeated. "It needs refinement and ironing out. We'll put it on the shelf for now. I am still going to talk to check on Val and see if she'll agree to let you guys run some tests of our own."

"I will join you."

Mikael blinked in surprise at Melina's sudden words.

She didn't blame him. She was just as surprised.

Still, it was better to accompany him than remain here where she would sit silently, unable to contribute anything but being an awkward ornament.

"I don't think she'll have a problem with just one of you," Mikael shrugged, then paused and tilted his head as a finger appeared from the shadow of his head and tapped him on the shoulder. "And Raven, of course. I don't have to say it every time. We're pretty much a package deal at this point."

Melina stood up and grabbed his arm as he looked at the rest of the group.

"Anyone needs anything while I am out?" He asked with a grin. "I'll be back.

Definitely. Maybe. I promise I am just going out to buy milk and cigarettes. “

Mikael ducked Tsunade’s sake cup with a laugh as he teleported them away.

“Must you aggravate everyone so much,” Melina asked in exasperation as they reappeared in an unfamiliar living room covered in electronic devices and inventions she didn’t recognize.

“Yes,” Mikael answered imperiously. “Because, Firstly, it’s funny. One, everyone needs catharsis, and I can provide that. And A. I use humour as a defence mechanism to hide deep-rooted insecurities and fear, and if I ever stop, I fear I will let someone close to my heart enough to get hurt again. Also, it’s funny.”

“Did you have a psychological breakthrough after breaking into my house?” A young girl asked with a laugh as she turned the corner of a distant hallway, an open laptop in her hand, which she set on the island in the center of the kitchen as she turned to look at them.

“No,” Melina facepalmed with a sigh. “A breakthrough would involve new information. He’s always been aware of his issues. You must be Valeria.”

As ever, she could talk about Mikael easily, even to a stranger.

Was she so without substance, without her own experiences, that she could only communicate through the medium of her Lord?

“I am,” the little girl nodded with a smile. “And you’re Melina! Thanks for the healing. I had a toothache that day.”

Melina didn’t move, unsure of what she should say here. So she stood still, as silent and unobtrusive as possible. Coming here may be even more awkward than staying behind.

“They are only issues if you want to change them. I’m happy with who I am,” Mikael interjected, perhaps sensing Melina’s discomfort. He stepped over the messy floor to reach the attached kitchen to ruffle the little girl’s hair. “How’ve you been, pipsqueak?”

The blonde hurried to rearrange her hair, but her smile didn’t fade as she hopped on a stool and spun herself around on it.

“Busy,” Valeria chirped as Melina carefully crossed the minefield of metal and other materials. “A long-term project the League asked my dad to help with. It’s pretty fun but time-consuming, and the deadline suddenly came up, so I had to scramble a bit. Even if you had contacted me earlier, I wouldn’t have been able to talk, so it’s good you waited.”

“Bright sides,” Mikael shrugged. “They’re everywhere if you look. What sort of project?”

“Mostly equipment that functions in space,” Val said eagerly as she spun herself again. “I’ve been working with Iron Man, the first Spider-man, Batman and Dragon on this new

variant of a Dragonsuit. Well, they think I'm my dad, but I couldn't miss the chance without raising concerns."

"Would not such a project be a secret?" Melina couldn't help but ask.

"Knowing more secrets won't give you more leverage over me," Valeria giggled at the 'obvious' question. "Besides, it is space. I miss space. It's so cool. I want to go back sometime."

"Tell you what," Mikael cracked a smile. "You let my wives examine you and your family, try and find this 'infection' in their own way, and I'll take you on a flight. No space suit needed."

"Really!" Valeria leaned forward eagerly. "That'd be awesome. You'd need to hide me, though. Can't have people spotting me with you."

"Some illusions will work," Mikael waived off her concern. "Do you want to stay around Earth or tour the solar system?"

"I want to get some samples from the moons of the other planets," Valeria said passionately. "Most of humanity has been locked to Earth since the Simurgh showed up. Right when we were getting off the ground, too. I have some theories I've been dying to test for years."

Melina's lips quirked upwards as she watched the two talk, discussing the wonders of space and some of the sights Mikael had seen on his trip toward Earth.

Her Lord often put up a prickly appearance. It was eager to push people away with his needling and manipulation, but that was as much a front as his genuine desire.

She saw it increasingly as time passed in the little excuses he told himself.

Of course, he wanted to be friendly with Batman and Superman. It would make Diana happy.

Engaging with the Teen Titans was purely to lower the local Raven's guard.

Attending a Gala will only help their public image and aid in gathering information with Emma.

The Amazons could live on the Island because there was no reason not to allow them.

Mikael had reasons for everything he did, Melina was sure. But there was no denying the pattern she saw in him.

The man who had been alone for centuries, whose only human interaction was silent observation for millions of years, craved connection.

As of right now, Mikael only cared about the Family. Melina believed all he would feel was a vague sense of loss if everyone and everything else died. He was incredibly insular like that.

But he was trying.

Tentatively, he reached out to the world, seeking more connections and more people.

He didn't have to offer sanctuary to a people who had been collateral damage between him and the gods. Many other countries would have been glad to take them in.

He didn't have to promise to take a little girl, trapped in a lonely apartment for years, flying. She would have let the Family examine her anyway.

And when presented with an enemy he couldn't fight, who outnumbered him, possibly outgunned him, and had already out-maneuvered him once, Mikael did not run.

Because, despite all his excuses, bravado, and trauma, Mikael was trying.

Trying to learn to care again.

Once, Melina saw a half-mad man talking to a corpse in a cave.

Now, there was a Lord. Growing. Learning.

Becoming whole again.

Melina was incredibly proud of the man.

And jealous.

He made it look so… easy.

Melina knew it wasn't, knew it would be decades or centuries before Mikael was able to open his heart to others, but a part of her envied that he was even trying.

Seeing her Lord talk to the little girl about planetary formations or the like, Melina had to look away.

She had accompanied Mikael here to escape the awkwardness, and instead, she found herself just as awkward, only with more self-recrimination.

Searching for a distraction, any distraction, Melina cast her eyes around the room.

She spent a moment eyeing the wall of photographs commemorating a happy family that currently lay in stasis.

Her eyes fell upon the mess on the floor, and she spent an idle minute trying to guess what each device did or would do when complete.

That could only occupy her attention for so long, unaware as she was about all but the most basic of technological devices.

Eventually, her eyes fell back on the talking duo.

"So neither you nor your brother have any powers," her Lord asked with a feigned air of casualness. "Nothing of your parent's abilities was genetically transmitted?"

"Their intelligence," Valeria said proudly. "I've never been tested, but if I was, I'd be Thinker seven at least, and just as much for Tinker. That's why I must claim my dad makes everything, or the boogeyman will also want me."

"The most useful superpower, even if it's underappreciated," Mikael nodded gravely before cracking a grin. "I always joked that I had Batman's superpower and Spider-Man's

money."

"Having Bruce Wayne's money and Spider-man's power would be better," Val giggled. "Peter Parker is also a genius, even if he doesn't perform as Spider-man as much these days. The second Spider-Man isn't dumb, either. They both struggled with money, though."

"I am honestly surprised you got the joke," Mikael said with a raised brow. Melina hadn't gotten the joke, so her eyes slid away from the conversation again. They fell on the laptop the girl had arrived with and set on the counter. Lights danced across the screen. "Batman is very good at hiding his identity, even if Spider-man isn't."

"I am the smartest little girl in the world," Val said, puffing her chest out with pride. "That, and my dad was part of some secret society, the Illuminati when I took over. I had him withdraw, but I still kept in contact. I've been looking for someone who could help me for years. I know pretty much every secret identity in the world."

"I bet I can find one you don't know," Mikael challenged with a grin. Was it admirable that he was keeping up with a high-level Thinker, or sad he was competing with a child?

Melina didn't know or think about it as she wasn't paying attention to the conversation anymore, her gaze on the computer screen.

"Try it," Val responded with her own grin.

"Let's start easy, Eidolon."

"Alexander Luthor Jr. Duh. He's part of the Illuminati."

"That's why it was an easy one. Next, Bloodwynd."

"Trick question, that was a name Martian Manhunter, J'onn J'onzz operated under as a disguise."

"Jack Slash?"

"That's an obscure one. A minor serial killer brought in by Flash and died in a prison riot. Real name Jacob Mathews."

"Here's one you won't get, Forgetmenot."

"… That's a Stranger, isn't it? And you're immune to Strangers."

"Giving up?"

"Not yet. I can still deduce something. That's a Stranger. I forgot the name. You know they're active, or was, and a Stranger strong enough to affect me won't have records. So they're active now, or you wouldn't know them. You also think I *should* know it. Which means either I've met them, unlikely, or someone I know is in close contact with them. Running through a list of people you know I am in contact with, one that would be immune to a Stranger that can affect me, narrows my list. Eidolon is a solo act most of the time. Batman wouldn't trust a Stranger. Dr. Strange or Professor X, then. The former is

more likely to have people able to affect my records because of magic, but the latter is in contact with many more Supers. Statistically, Xavier is the more likely choice. So, they're an X-man or a villain that faced them. That leaves-"

"What is happening?"

Melina didn't mean to interrupt her Lord's game or the little girl's rambling thought process, but what she saw on the laptop's screen was as beautiful as it was confusing.

She recognized the Iron Man symbol, as well as Superman, Green Lantern, and a few others. They were fighting… fire?

It had been the flames that had captured Melina's attention for so long, and eventually, the question had slipped out.

"What?" Valeria asked, looking over at the mostly silent woman and followed her gaze to the computer. "Oh, that. That was the project I told you about." She said excitedly. Mikael rounded the counter to stand beside Melina to watch as well. Melina noted how the blood left his face as flames flowed across the screen. "I asked for a feed of the fight to see how the mech worked out. Cool, right? I used my uncle's suit as a base for the material. The only way for it to stand up to the heat of the Phoenix."

"We need to leave," Mikael said seriously, eyes wide in panic. "Now."

"Already?" Valeria asked with a tilt of her head, her smile not dimming. "You just got here."

"No, I mean, I need to leave this planet," Mikael said as he grabbed Melina roughly. "As soon as possible. It might already be too late."

"My Lord," Melina asked worriedly, never having seen the man so panicked. He had stared down gods without flinching. Why was he so desperate now?

"Looks like I won't be able to help you, Val," Mikael said with genuine regret. "I hope things work out for you. I'll check back in a few years."

"Why?"

Val was physically unable to feel sadness, despair, or hopelessness, but the smile on her face had never been smaller.

Melina's heart went out to her, but confusion more than sympathy filled her.

Mikael's answer did not clear up that confusion.

"My psychotic, bird-brained, planet-burning, conceptually-immortal, and eternally unrelenting, yandere stalker found me. I don't want a Nice Boat ending. Or worse."

Author's Note:

Sorry for the rough quality on this one. I lost my entire hard drive earlier this week, and I've been dealing with that, so I didn't have time for as many rounds of edits as I like. *Thankfully, my writing is saved online, so I didn't lose it.*

There's little to say about this one. Volume 3 is largely about taking all the pieces I've laid out from Volumes 1 and 2 and setting the dominoes falling as we march towards the end. I have a list of scenes, perspectives, and points the story needs to hit as we go along, so I am never lacking in knowing 'what' to write. I only struggle to find the best way to frame things, set a nice pace, and provide what payoffs I can without waiting for the end.

For those despairing at the pace of the Consequences so far, you might want to wait till I finish an arc, or even the whole volume, before reading it all at once. There are benefits to serialization, as it gives readers time to think about, wonder over, or fantasize about what is coming, but the wait can be frustrating. Hopefully, the end is worth the wait.

I'll see you all next week.

Ps: The surprise I mentioned in the first chapter of volume 3 that I have been working on now has a date. It will be revealed on the first weekend in November.

CONSEQUENCES V

"And here's my advice to you. If you get the chance of the mad kind of love, grab it with both hands and to hell, with the consequences."
-Ken Follett

"Everyone still here?" I asked as Melina and I reappeared in my dining room.

It had only been ten or so minutes since I had left to see Valeria, so I expected them not to have gone far, but you never know with my wives. They could be raiding thousand-year-old wine stores from an Egyptian crypt within that time if they wanted.

Thankfully, they weren't.

"Good. We're leaving. Diana, tell your people if they want off the Island, they have a one-time, one-hour pass to leave. Medea, Yoruichi, Ranni, I need you to kill any invaders still on the Island. You also have an hour. Everyone else? You have the same time to say goodbyes to anyone, but I want us gone in sixty minutes."

Typically, these were women of action: heroines, villains, combatants, and decisive fighters. In emergencies, I had seen them act with less than a second's thought. In one instance, I had seen Yoruichi go from fall-over-drunk to soul-reaping assassin in less time than it took me to blink.

So, when I came bursting back into our dining room, ready to get moving and get shit done, I expected questions but also immediate action.

I didn't expect all of them to sit there and not move a muscle as they looked at me with confusion.

"What?" I asked. "We're moving people. Let's get to it."

"Normally, I'd be worried you somehow caused an apocalypse in the last ten minutes," Medea sighed, but her eyes were soft. Why? Couldn't they see this was a time for decisive action? We needed to go! "Pride told us it was just the Phoenix."

As if to emphasize her point, the red-cloaked Raven emerged from my shadow, nose pointed in the air in pride as she smirked at me.

"Daddy doesn't need to worry about the bird," she said, four red eyes narrowing as she stared at me. Was it concern in them? Derision? Did she see my desire to flee as a weakness? "We can deal with the chicken easily."

I nearly choked.

"Don't worry?" I asked rhetorically, praying I had heard her wrong. "Just the Phoenix?"

"You're panicking," Tsunade warned. "Can you calm down?"

I am calm. I am always calm. I am as still as frozen water and pure as the fallen snow.

I don't need to calm down.

I need to get moving. Yesterday.

"You told us about threats when we landed," Yoruichi said with an awkward half smile as if breaking news that I should already know. "The Phoenix Force is… not a worry for us."

I looked to Emma, the person I knew would back me up. She had experienced the powerful entity herself in her home dimension.

"I've been the host of the Phoenix Force before," the psychic shrugged. "Or at least half of it before my *ex-husband*." She spat the word. "Stabbed me in the back to take its full power. And… it isn't a problem. Not with our Defences."

Betrayal on all sides.

"We know you have concerns," Diana spoke up, and I looked at her in hope. Her face was resolute, and she spoke slowly. "And, if you are insistent, we need to leave." "I am. Let's go!" "We will listen to you. But Raven says your emotions are all over the place, and you aren't thinking clearly. Rushed decisions aren't like you. Will you please just explain it? We have time, correct?"

"We don't."

"Heroes are currently battling it," Melina answered at the same time as I did. "They're in space, I don't know where."

"So we have at least a few minutes," Diana nodded. "Worst comes to worst, we will leave without saying goodbye. But we do not see a reason to leave. Will you please convince us?"

I could force it.

At the end of the day, this was my pocket dimension.

I could take it with me wherever I went. I could grab it and hop to a random plane of existence, and they couldn't stop me.

With my true body, I was free to do whatever I wanted.

And they weren't.

I could impose my will on them, either with Command Seals or 'kidnapping,' and deal with the consequences later. The most they could do was control my Avatar, limiting me to my True Body until the issue was settled.

Yet they hadn't.

'Can you calm down?' 'Will you explain it?'

I had noticed how they spoke and how careful they were with their words to avoid giving me an order. They could have forced me to 'calm down' or forced me to 'talk.'

Instead, with only a minute of heads up from Raven, they left me to decide independently.

They were being decisive, just not in the way I expected and wanted them to be.

I inhaled deeply.

My hands were shaking. It wasn't from fear.

I needed to leave. Now.

But these were my wives, and they had a right to know.

I completely closed off my pocket dimension from external intrusion to be safe.

I would try to see their side.

I exhaled.

"Why don't you think the Phoenix Force, one of the most powerful entities in the ENTIRETY OF COMICS, is an issue."

Ok, I was trying. That didn't mean I wasn't above being sassy.

If I ever stopped being sassy, I really would die.

I am the bone of my sass.

Sarcasm is my body, and fun is my blood.

I have uttered over a thousand bants.

Unaware of laughter,

Nor aware of grins.

Withstood puns to create-

When Robin started to talk, I interrupted my entirely rational attempt to recreate the Unlimited Blade Works chant in my own fashion, using the same first letters to keep it challenging.

I am not escaping reality. You are!

… If anyone asks you, Emma, that pun was totally intentional.

"We believe that you are overestimating the threat the Phoenix Force poses to us," Artoria began, arms crossed as she spoke. There was no hurry in her voice as if she was simply delivering a report. "Overestimating an enemy is just as dangerous as underestimating them."

"I agree," I said quickly. You could make accurate, actionable plans only by being aware of your enemy's true capability. "But, and I feel like I am repeating myself here, the Phoenix Force casually burns planets. I think overestimating it is hard."

"As far as we are aware of," Medea continued. "The Phoenix's main forms of threat are fourfold. Psychic, fire, and the warping of reality using the former. It also can inhabit hosts, enhancing their existing abilities to unheard-of heights and granting them new ones. These are its only known abilities, correct?"

“Correct,” I nodded, and this time, I bit off the sarcasm that nearly escaped my lips. I needed to stop further digressions if I wanted to get the show on the road.

“We are immune to it’s psychic abilities. Absolutely, thanks to the Defences. Reality Warping can work around us, but not on us directly. And it uses the latter mostly through hosts, not directly, because it doesn’t need to, correct?”

“As far as I am aware.” I nodded. “There are exceptions. Bringing back the dead, rewinding time, or other things authors use at their convenience. But in most cases I know of the Phoenix Force’s reality-bending powers are used when combined with someone else’s mind. It’s how it enhances them, even for powers it doesn’t have on its own..”

The Phoenix Force was pretty simple, as embodiments of nature tend to be. It wasn’t creative or wise. If fire wasn’t solving its problem, throw more fire at the problem. If even that fails, then search for a host who can use it to accomplish the goal. It had a mind, but it was almost like a baby AI.

It was like the Entities from Worm in a way. There was intent and power, but the mind was almost infantile.

In many ways, the Phoenix Force, more than any other super being in comics, was a writer’s plot device more than a character itself. A source of power to supercharge a character for an issue before it fucks right off again.

In comics, at least.

Here?

“It can be repelled,” Artoria declared. “Emma told us of it being fought off, even destroyed for a time, in a host and on its own form. When destroyed, it forms an egg and is reborn, but until then, it is not a factor. Am I right?”

“Yes, but destroying it to that degree is practically impossible without serious Deus Ex Machina bullshit,” I pointed out. It felt like all I was doing was going, ‘Yes, but…’

None of their information was wrong, per se, but there were caveats to everything.

Did they not understand how much hand-waving bullshit went into comics to allow the good guys to win? Something we didn’t have. I wasn’t one of those people who thought power was the be-all and end-all, but some things weren’t possible unless you were a being like Darkseid, the One Above All, Galactus, or other cosmic entities tied to the very fabric of reality.

That was what it meant to be Tier 11.

Not power. Pedigree.

An existence that was as close to inviolable by the world’s rules as you could get.

“And, physically, your true body is a match for it. This leaves its enhanced hosts and fires the only real threat to us. And you’d be able to ‘Free’ it from its hosts because,

subconsciously, people don't want a foreign alien force influencing them. Which only leaves fire. Which also isn't a threat to your true body because you can heal faster than you burn. This, too, is all correct to our knowledge," Glynda picked up.

Were they talking amongst themselves without my knowledge? Was Emma coordinating them mentally?

I looked at the psychic, and she shook her head.

So this really was just their understanding as things stood.

I should explain a bit more then.

"Yes and no. There are probably one or two people who, even subconsciously, see the gain of power as worth the intrusion. Physically, my body is stronger, as far as I am aware, but the Phoenix Force is more durable."

"Than thee, my Lord?" Ranni asked with an eyebrow raised in disbelief. "With thy bottomless well of might and thine miracles, I struggle to imagine a being capable of slaying thy true body. Did the heroes of Emma's world not repel it and shatter it at one time?"

"Ok," I said, putting the pieces together. "I think I see the problem. I am looking at this from a Doylan perspective, whereas you are looking at it from a Watsonian point of view. We both have out-of-context knowledge, but the standpoint is different. And I know a few things you don't. First of all, yes. The Phoenix Force can be beaten back under certain circumstances. It's power can be divided or forcefully absorbed. That is all true. But, and this is key, it cannot die. It is not an immortal or powerful being. It is a force of nature. It is the embodiment of all life in this universe. Past, present, and future. So long as life exists in any universe it touches, so will the Phoenix Force. The only reason it manifests as a firebird is that fire is the best way to purge old life and grow new life."

"It lacks the concept of death," Medea asked, leaning forward in interest. "Would Priscilla not be able to instill it and slay the bird?"

The crossbreed sleepily blinked at the mention of her name. I placed my hand on her shoulder and purged the alcohol from her, and she perked right up.

"I wouldn't risk it till she is at least Tier 10," I said seriously as I rubbed the dragon girl's scalp. "And it has the concept of death within it. It's just that its death is tied to the death of all life. And it can draw power from that life. Its psychic powers come from all the minds that have existed, currently exist, or will exist. The simple fact is, if the Phoenix Force wishes, it can draw upon that life, unbound by time and space, for whatever it wishes. Like Trigon, there is a technical limit to its power, unlike me, but both are functionally limitless and without stopgaps by body."

"But we are immune to its most dangerous powers," Diana clarified, and I nodded.

“The greatest threat it could pose to us is to set our solar system ablaze. Otherwise, we can retreat to the Island, which can’t harm us. As far as I understand, it does not take such actions lightly.”

“It normally won’t,” I nodded again. “Payout versus cost to it. It

“So we need only beat it back. All of us, you included, will be able to operate without fear of collateral in space,” Artoria picked up again, but I stopped her right there.

“No. We cannot fight it,” I shook my head grimly. “If it sees me, it is game over. Do not pass go; do not collect two hundred dollars.”

That stopped them in their tracks, and for the first time, I saw I had genuinely caught them off guard. Now that I knew the problem came from a different perspective, I could identify why they weren’t reacting like I thought they should.

I said the following words slowly, clearly enunciating every word so there would be a clear understanding.

“Now that I am awake, the Phoenix Force will do anything, absolutely anything, to get me.”

My words fell like a sword, silencing the room. Nobody breathed. Then Emma spoke, an awed, fearful note to her voice as she read my mind.

“It found you during the Dream.”

“A lot of things did,” I shrugged. “I didn’t have Defences, remember? Anybody could sense my power. It started small, but after the first million years or so, it was significant enough to attract attention. I Freed myself and the Jewel from real space, but I needed a tether to this dimension, or I’d leave it entirely, violating the deal with Death. I was far from any planet, star, galaxy, or supercluster, but many things don’t care about distance in this world. Celestials. Living Planets. Certain alien species. A lot of things found me. And the Phoenix was one of them.”

“Your Life element, a body that could contain its limitless power, a spiritual and historical connection to fire, and a mind alien enough to connect with it without the bounds of humanity,” Emma breathed out in realization. “You’re not a psychic, but you are a perfect host for it.”

“It tried,” I sighed, returning to that long, long Dream. “For hundreds of thousands of years, it tried. It would bombard me psychically every second of every day to join with it. Even without Defences, I can still free myself. I remained me. Then, it could ignore its duties no longer. It left me to go burn planets and stars, renewing the life of the universe. But it came back. It always came back. Every ten thousand or so years, it would return to me and resume its attempts. For millions of years, I’ve dealt with the Phoenix Force.”

It was hard to express just how… much the Phoenix was. Even as a Great One, its

mind and will had covered me like a weighted blanket. It had never been malicious. Beings of its level rarely are, but its mere presence had towered over me for tens of millions of years.

And I had wanted it.

Not the intrusion into my mind. I would never want that, but I wanted what its power could give me. Literal wish fulfilment, independent of my deal with Death. I could rewrite reality to my whim. And I would be truly immortal. Not just unaging but actually unable to die.

I could be fearless and free.

The Phoenix Force tempted me with that promise for tens of millions of years.

But I had made such a deal before.

"Then you can deal with it now, can you not?" Diana asked with a raised brow. "It should be even easier now that you have the Defences."

"It can't merge with me without my permission," I acknowledged. "That isn't the problem. The problem is it will continue trying. Ever. And that was before it discovered what it was like to feel emotions from Jean Grey. It left me last time a few hundred years ago. I thought I still had a few thousand years before it discovered my absence from the 'nest.' It's why I never brought it up."

"You should have," Artoria said, and I winced. I never claimed not to be a hypocrite, but when it came to my wives, I tried to do for them as I asked them to do for me.

"I know," I said, filled with contrition. "It's not an excuse, but leaving will solve this issue. It might not know I am here, but if it does, do any of you think it won't pull a Jean Grey to try and 'get me.' I told Val it was a Yandere Stalker, and I wasn't lying. It might try and kill every woman I know and love, so there's no competition. Or only the psychics. Or destroy the planet to get to me. I don't mind a Yandere, but it has to be one I can control. I cannot control the Phoenix Force."

"So we destroy it," Artoria said simply. "Heroes are fighting it now. We should aid them."

"This is not a battle we can win," I said gravely. "You must understand, the Phoenix Force has no limit. The part in Jean Grey is a fragment of a fragment of its power. It has never had a host that could display its full power, yet it is still enough to destroy galaxies. It can drain life from the past, future, and present to strengthen itself. It normally wouldn't; it goes against its nature as a representation of Life, but if it wants something enough, it will do it. And it wants me very much. The more we fight it, the more Life we kill."

"You're not running because you're afraid," Diana said with realization, and I nodded.

“You’re doing it to save lives.”

“I fear what it will do if it ever sees any of you. It’s my fault for not communicating this,” I acknowledged again. “It should have been an easy thing to deal with. You are right. The Phoenix Force is an annoyance to me at best. If it appeared on Earth, I figured I’d fuck off for a few weeks to a month. Long enough for the heroes to chase it off-world again. But the situation has changed. Either it is coming here because it knows I am here, in which case it will do anything to get to me, or it doesn’t. If it doesn’t, and we leave, it will most likely bond to a host and the Oppressor will have the reality warper. Only instead of fake, it would be real. Probably Madelyne Pryor since she’s a Jean clone. I don’t know if it can control the Phoenix, but it can certainly control her.”

“And if it knows you are here but you leave, it will continue to search,” Medea was tapping her lip in contemplation.

“It shouldn’t know I am here,” I repeated. “That’s why I didn’t think it would be a problem. I have the Defences now. It shouldn’t be able to find me at all. Even if it tried to return to me right after I left the ‘nest,’ which it shouldn’t do, space is big. Really big. It should be searching the void between stars for me, and it should have no reason to come looking at Earth. It was just here a few years ago, and I wasn’t. If we leave now, the heroes either fight it off, which would be best, or it makes it to Earth, and we’re gone. It might pull information from me from the minds of people. Then it will either remain to see if I come back or fly off in search again. But if I am here and it can’t get to me? It will make a supernova look tame. So the best option is to leave now, check back in a few months to a year, and repeat until the coast is clear.”

“Worst case scenario is it knows you are here and arrives. Whether you are here or not, the Earth will probably not survive the full power of the Dark Phoenix,” Emma said grimly. “Host or no host. I don’t know how it ended in this world, but in mine, it left Earth only because Jean killed herself rather than continue to be a threat. Leaving right before it arrives heightens the likelihood it will chase rather than rage.”

“We can’t plan for failure,” I said with a nod. “We don’t want the ‘Oppressor’ to gain control of a Phoenix host. Keeping the Phoenix from Earth is the best way to solve all problems. Whether it knows I am here or not, my leaving will hopefully lead it away. Hell, this just might be this world’s version of the Avengers vs. X-Men event or something similar, and it will sort itself out without us. We don’t have to be involved with everything, and keeping out of it will stop the situation from being too complicated.”

It didn’t line up with that storyline. M-day hadn’t happened, Hope Summers didn’t exist, last I checked, Madelyne Pryor was still pregnant with Cable, Jean Grey was *actually* dead, and the Avengers were missing some of their heaviest hitters.

Still, this could be this universe's version of the Phoenix returning to Earth to find some new host to experience more emotions before it came back to me.

Our greatest hope at the moment was that the Phoenix still thought I was floating in space and wasn't actively looking for me. Then, it would have no reason to go 'all out' on the heroes of this world, and they could chase it off.

I knew the birdbrain better than almost anyone in existence. I had felt its mind pressed up against mine for millions of years. I understood how it thought.

As a rule of thumb, the Phoenix Force just didn't care about little things like fights or damage. Its only goal had been to ensure Life flourished. It was too big, too all-encompassing to have much of a worry about itself. Is its body in one universe shattered? So what? It would come back. In a year, maybe in a thousand.

The Phoenix force didn't care. It simply was.

Until it met me or Jean Grey.

Then, emotions got involved.

"Do you truly believe that?" Raven asked, and I grimaced.

I didn't think I was the center of the universe or anything, but downplaying my position was just as bad as overestimating it. Death had explicitly chosen this universe because it had the best chance to force me to become Tier 11.

I knew of two ways to do that.

The first was to merge with the Phoenix Force. Anybody combining with it was automatically Tier 11 if they were even the slightest bit compatible. The other idea was the one I had when the Dream ended, and Emma entered my mind.

I refused to take either option.

I was looking for another way. Any other way. Both would mean losing who I was in exchange for the rise in status.

There was a genuine possibility that this entire situation was manipulated by Death to force me to try and take in the mercurial psychic entity. She didn't care for universes, lives, or anything but her freedom.

I couldn't say I blamed her; I had done the same for the same goal, but it chafed me to know that everything I went through could directly result from someone's plan to force me to ascend.

Or it could be my paranoia, and Death was simply watching from the sidelines, never interfering.

I only internally thanked my Family that they hadn't pointed out the obvious solution to the problem.

They knew me well enough that I would never let something like the Phoenix into my

mind.

"Then leaving is really the best option," Diana sighed as she stood from the table. "I will talk to my mo- to Hippolyta. I pray we will only be gone for a few days or weeks."

"I will let our allies know of our departure," Robin said with a bitter smile, crossing her arms over her chest. "Let's keep the exact reasons a secret, but it is better they are alerted to avoid a panic. They will alert the public. We won't have control over the message, but it's the best we can do. With any luck, it will blow over quickly."

"I will say farewell to the team," Glynda stood with a resigned smile. She had been getting attached.

All around me, my family started leaving and preparing for departure. It wasn't the frantic, rushed move I expected.

Not one of them looked happy. Priscilla looked like she was going to cry.

We had been starting a life here.

Making friends and connections, setting down roots. If we had our way, this world would be a base we could use for millennia as we explored other universes and realities.

And we were leaving it.

It was a bitter scene, yet my heart swelled, and emotion choked my throat.

They didn't want to leave, that was plain, yet *they would*.

Because they trusted my judgement and word. Because they trusted I had the best interest of this Family, and even the world, in mind when I made a decision.

They trusted me when I said it was the best choice.

"Wait!"

Emma's voice stopped everyone in their tracks.

She had stood as well as the others, possibly to tell her local counterpart of the departure.

Then she froze.

"We're running because we cannot let the Phoenix Force find you, right?" Emma clarified, and her face was noticeably pale. "Because once it does, unless you bond with it, it will tear the earth apart trying to get to you, right?"

"Right," I nodded, worried about her look. "If it gets here and I am gone, even if it knows I was here at one point, it will keep looking. But if it sees me, then I leave, it might just burn the star system in its rage. Our best bet is it gets here, finds I am gone, and fucks right off. We're back in a week."

"What if," Emma stuttered, licking her lips in nervousness. She was starting to shake. "What if it thought it got what it wanted? If, after millions of years, it sensed your open and undefended mind, inviting it in?"

“I’m never letting that thing in my mind,” I answered with absolute certainty.

“But what if the Phoenix Force thought you did, only for it to be fake,” she asked in a hurry. “What will it do then?”

“Going by Yandere rules?” I asked with a snort. “The target of affection returns said affection, only for it to be fake? The mother of all rampages. Everyone, even slightly related, gets the knife. ‘If I can’t have him, nobody can’ mentality.”

“What brought this on?” Medea asked the mutant with a frown.

“I asked myself, ‘Why is it coming to earth now,’” Emma said with a grimace. “And I only had one answer. My Semblance.”

There was a beat of silence as I took the idea in.

“That… is possible,” Diana muttered. “If it is as powerful as we believe and is actively searching for Mikael, it would have sensed even the slightest hint of him from the other side of the universe.”

“So it felt your Semblance,” I nodded. “Nobody can blame you for that since I didn’t tell you it would be looking for me. That’s why it’s coming now. All the more reason to get gone.”

“We cannot,” Glynda said with a tired rub of her eyes. “If her Semblance was just a copy of your mind, it would be one thing. But it isn’t, is it.”

“My Semblance is the manifestation of what I felt when we were one,” Emma said softly as if admitting a deep shame. “It isn’t your mind at all. That is too alien and powerful to replicate it. It is my experience in it. Your Love, your power, the dreams and possibilities I saw. The things we would be able to do together. That’s why everyone’s experience with it is different and why it’s a Master ability. It doesn’t force people to do what I want. It makes them want to do anything to please you in order to achieve their own goals, no matter how complex or simple. It is all possible if they have your Love, so they do anything they can to get that Love.”

“But for the Phoenix, that state itself is the goal,” I said in realization, collapsing back into my seat with realization. “For all intent and purposes, when you had your Semblance active, it was merged with me.”

“And when it ended, it knew exactly where to go,” Emma nodded grimly. “And when it gets here, and you are gone, it will find out everyone else felt the same merging. I… do not believe it will take that well.”

“A Yandere finds out its ‘love’ was mind fucking everyone on the planet after it spent millions of years trying to accomplish the same thing without success? Running or not, it doesn’t matter anymore,” I let out a bitter chuckle.

My wives had been right. The Phoenix wasn’t a worry to me directly.

My initial panic had been the almost PTSD-like response to dealing with THE psychic for millions of years. One that was obsessed with me.

I could see that now. But I still thought running was the best plan.

Trigon and the gods were more of a risk to me in a direct threat. Even if fighting wasn't an option, I had kept it at bay for millions of years, and I could do it again. But where would that end? What was my victory condition? Be cooped up on my Island for another hundred thousand years while the Earth burned?

To everything else but me? The Phoenix was an apocalypse approaching on burning wings.

I was never in danger, but others were. I had tried to be a hero in my own cowardly way. To run and lead the threat away.

What a silly idea.

For a long second, I allowed the melancholy to sit in me.

Then, it was time to get to work.

"Ok," I stated, sitting up straight. I could feel sad, angry, or resigned, but I couldn't let that stop me. "Running won't work. Fighting won't work. And I am not going to become its host. So I am out of ideas. How do we stop a Yandere force of nature from turning the Earth into charcoal? Thoughts? Ideas? Plans crazy enough to just might work? I am open to anything at the moment."

Credit where it was due. My wives had ideas ready at hand.

"Lure it away," Tsunade said immediately. "If it's objective is you, then make it think you are somewhere else. Either you or Emma can lure it away from Earth."

"That only delays the inevitable," Diana shook her head. "It will return, and we can only distract it a few times before it understands the trick. If it cannot be destroyed, then it must be trapped. Many an immortal foe of mine was defeated in this manner. Do we have a method that could contain it?"

"No," Medea shook her head. "Any prison or seal will fall. Especially if it draws power from all life of the universe."

"I want to clarify that the Phoenix Force is a multi-universe level entity," I pointed out. "It isn't at the level of Death, and is consigned to 'local' multiverses, but it does exist over many of them at once. Any prison needs to have dimensional components to contain it. We can't fight a monster which draws power from all life in the local multiverse cluster. It simply isn't possible."

"Can we not trap it on the Island," Priscilla pointed out. "Sir Bard would prevent its escape, and it might not even attempt to leave."

"I could…" I said with a grimace.

The Island was my pocket dimension, a part of my being. I wasn't omnipotent or omnipresent, but I had absolute control over what entered and left.

Until now, I had set it to 'things can come in, but cannot come out' as a sort of fly trap for my foes of this world. It acted as a meat grinder, a passive way of killing off those with malicious intent towards me and my Family. It was so large that I didn't need to care about most of the space, and only the southern tip was used for habitation, protected by the most potent bounded field Medea and I could make.

"Our barriers would not hold it back," Yoruichi frowned. "If it is trapped here, we will not be able to use the Island at all. We'd lose our home and one of our greatest assets."

"Perhaps we are going about this incorrectly," Glynda tapped her lips in thought. "We are assuming it is an enemy. It is a threat to the world if not us, but it acts not out of malicious intent. It is simply trying to find its perfect host, is it not? What if we present it with a better one than Mikael?"

Could I just say how much I loved my wives? Not once had they ever entertained the idea of letting it merge with me.

"Who are you thinking?" Robin leaned forward. "We cannot allow someone under the 'oppressor' to gain the power of the Phoenix."

In response, eyes fell on two people.

"No." Tsunade declared strongly. Her hand fell to her abdomen as an explanation, and all eyes shifted from her to fall on the last option.

Emma stared at the ceiling in thought. Her poise slightly recovered, but she was still paler than usual.

"I…" She started to speak, paused, thought about it some more, and started again. "I don't think it will work. Or if it did, it would end badly."

"You were a host before," Artoria said with a furrowed brow. "What prevents you from accepting it again?"

"And it's your semblance that attracted it," Glynda nodded. Emma winced at the reminder. "As the only psychic among us, you would be the best fit for a host."

"I don't want us to take in the Phoenix," I interrupted. "Every single one of its hosts is influenced by it. We would be, too. To take it in, we'd need to lower our Defenses to it, leaving us susceptible to its power."

"But it can be controlled," Diana pointed out. "Jean Grey did so. As did other hosts. You have told me so. Emma is our most experienced in mental discipline and most likely to retain control. And if she fails, you can just Free her."

"I could trap thee and it in mine Diorama to facilitate the binding," Ranni proposed. "T'will not stand up to such power for long, but it can give thee privacy and some measure

of safety should it run rampant till our Lord Frees thee."

"I will not be able to control the Phoenix," Emma denied. "Because I do not want to. And if I am its host, Mikael will not be able to Free me. I will not want to be Free either."

I rubbed my eyes tiredly at Emma's declaration. I didn't need to look to know that my more heroic wives were giving the White Queen severe looks at her admittance.

Sensing my feelings, Medea jumped on my lap and rubbed against me while purring. I idly scratched her behind the ears as I ran over the situation in my head.

Priscilla, bless her floofy heart, didn't understand the implications.

"Because of thy Semblance?" She asked with a tilt of her head.

We had been at this for a while now. We were running out of time and had no clear answer yet.

As of right now, we might go with the 'lead it away' plan to buy more time. A handful of minutes was not enough time to devise a plan to deal with a sapient force of nature.

"Because I will use its power for the same goal," Emma said. "When you host the Phoenix, everything is so much… more. As an embodiment of Life, it enhances everything about you. You are stronger, of course. But so are your emotions. Your love and hate. Your dreams and fears. You take actions you would never before because all hesitation is gone. You think you are in control because your goals haven't changed. But you aren't because you no longer have the mortal limits or considerations."

I opened my eyes, and they met hers. Normally composed and cool, I saw the emotions bubbling below them.

There was love, of course, but there was so much more.

Madness. Desire. Fanaticism. Devotion. Fear.

"If I have the Phoenix Force," Emma said, staring into my draconian eyes. "I will do everything I can to become one with Mikael again. If I think burning this planet will get me that, I will. I will not have the Phoenix Force. The Phoenix Force will have me."

I stood up. All eyes turned to me.

"I am going to lure it away," I said, and when they made to speak, I raised a hand to silence it. "I'll teleport back to where I Dreamed. It considers it a 'nest'. I'll lower my Information Defence. It will come flying. As will anything else after me. So I am going to teleport right back. It will buy us some time. Days, maybe weeks, depending on how fast it flies. We'll come up with a plan by then. Even if it is just to run away and pray."

"That is for the best," Diana said, returning her attention to Emma. "It will also allow us to coordinate with the League. Perhaps they have a plan we aren't aware of."

"I'll be back in five minutes," I nodded at them.

Then, I paused and looked around the room. Twelve women. One cat(?). Pride was

gone, probably slipped into my shadow, but I was still missing a wife.

"Where's Melina?"

******

In the void of space, beyond Jupiter, a spaceship flew in the wake of flames.

The Phoenix blazed through the dark, a fiery light that none could miss.

Enormous and bright, it dominated the screens of the console. Windows would be a structural weakness in the craft, an unacceptable one, so cameras were the only means by which the passengers could watch the fight.

If it could be called a fight at all.

Hundreds of robotic drones, all equipped with psychic disruptions, buzzed around the mass of psionic fire under the control of Dragon. Accompanying them were a half a dozen heroes. Superman and Supergirl blasted holes through its body. Wonder Woman carved into it with an enchanted blade. Iron Man, encased in fire-immune armour tens of meters tall, tore chunks of fire into long rivers of molten energy, sucking them up into a reactor explicitly designed to use the Phoenix's power.

Eidolon, limited in his versatility in space, equipped a Mover power to teleport others around, avoiding any rogue blast of fire or force. Green Lantern encased the enormous firebird in a green globe of manifested Willpower. It's shattering was only momentary before it was replaced by another. Over and over, the green glow manifested only to be destroyed. Hal Jordan was an exceptional Green Lantern, possibly one of the best to ever live, but even he didn't have more Willpower than a manifestation of all Life.

They attacked with everything they had. Physical, energy-based, magical, or psychic, they threw it all at the monster. They weren't trying to kill it, just to slow it down. If they could impede it enough, waste enough of its power that it would simply give up, turn around and find greener pastures.

And the Phoenix?

It ignored them.

In another time, in another place, with another Phoenix, the Earth's mightiest heroes could fight to impede the sapient force of nature.

But this Phoenix had a goal, and nothing would slow it down.

The passengers on the space shuttle knew this.

Their job was to protect the minds of the fighters and themselves from any influence the psychic being would exert on them.

More than those engaged in direct conflict, they faced the most significant risk. And

they understood just how fruitless this fight really was.

The Phoenix Force didn't even recognize them as threats.

Its mind, weighing down on all of them with the force of a god, was entirely oblivious to them. Just by flying by, the psychic energy of nature exerted enough pressure that Martian Manhunter had lost control of his shape-shifting, Zatanna's voice was raw from all her casting, and Dr. Strange's brow was covered in sweat as he stood in his ritual circle.

They could feel the Phoenix's single-minded focus on its goal. It made no attempt to hide its desire for the White Dragon, for Life.

There would be talks with the Elden Lord after this, but for now, their goal was to ensure Earth's survival and the Phoenix's banishment.

Their attacks were inconsequential as it drew power from all life itself.

It never stopped.

It never saw them.

It simply flew on by.

They were fighting its wake.

They did battle with the hot wind of its passage.

This was what it meant to face the Phoenix Force when it bent its will to a goal.

It considered them only dust. Space dust on its space road.

That was their advantage.

Even dust could choke a dragon.

He could see their plan.

Simple, yet effective.

There were three layers.

The first was the superficial one. Do enough damage, and the Phoenix Force could decide to try its luck elsewhere.

The second was subtle. The magician worked her magic to twist space. It shrunk and bent; two points halfway across the solar system were suddenly right next to each other.

They had learned a lesson from their initial class with the Elden Lord. If you cannot fight a foe, redirect it. This solution would work if the Phoenix's goal was beyond Earth. It would fly by without caring about the change.

It wouldn't work. The Mistress of Flame's goal was on Earth itself. But the magic served as camouflage for the final plan.

The final layer was the Sorcerer Supreme.

His ritual, empowered by the energy Iron Man siphoned from the bird itself, wouldn't harm the mass of energy. It was a simple accelerated time spell with a healing component. Not only was it the Phoenix's own power, but all it would do was force the bird to rest and

heal at an accelerated rate.

The Phoenix would return to its egg stage for a short amount of time and emerge stronger than ever.

It wouldn't resist such a 'gift.'

But a thousand years was short only to a being of its calibre. To the mortals of Midgard, it was long enough to decide the fate of their world.

They could use the Phoenix egg as a source of power, a deterrent against other threats, or simply send it into the void of space to avoid the attention it would bring on the cosmic scale.

Odin admired wisdom like this. The ingenuity of mortals never failed to fill his old heart with joy.

Were this any other situation, he would have lent aid to the mortals for their cunning and their might. Even without his help, they very well might succeed.

But the agents of the enemy could not be allowed success. And Odin could not allow this opportunity to slip him by.

The Odinforce was not at its peak. It had been too long since his last Odinsleep, and most of his power was occupied with keeping his people safe.

It was still enough to take out unaware mortals, no matter how mighty they were.

All the inhabitants of the spacecraft slumped in sleep, and without their protection, the heroes in the void had no defence against the firebird's mind.

Odin watched from the top of the spaceship as they felt its mind pressing down on them one by one. Had he or the Phoenix wanted any of them dead, they would have died.

But they were but mortals in the game of gods.

When they turned to the ship, fearful of the fate of their comrades, they saw him.

It was too late.

With skill born of millennia, Odin turned the weaving of the magician's spell upon them. Space twisted, and they were in the vessel with their comrades. The sorcerer's spell, empowered by Phoenix Fire, hit their unprotected minds, and they fell into the best sleep they would ever have.

The childish, trickster part of Odin, the part that was more like Loki than Thor, enjoyed tactics like this.

Using less power than most mortals possessed, he had disabled some of the greatest heroes of the world through skill and trickery alone. For just a moment, Odin felt like he was a million years younger.

But not all of them fell.

The Amazon. She was still awake. Her mind was more resilient after encountering the

abomination's monstrous form.

But she was still mortal.

Odin put her under with the dregs of the Odinforce he could spare. Sighing at Zeus' foolish shortsightedness, Odin looked at the fire in the stars.

The Phoenix had stopped.

It hovered there, larger than Asgard, and burned with fire and life.

Though it might not consider most mortals worth attention, Odin was a different story. Not because he wielded the Odinforce but because of who he was.

There was a history there, and the Phoenix Force remembered him even in the throes of its single-minded obsession.

"Our son needs your help."

Odin's voice, carried by his magic, covered the miles of distance between the two, even in the vacuum of space.

The Phoenix tilted its head in a bird-like fashion.

He saw Firehair as she once was. Beautiful as any star and as effervescent as flame. Odin saw himself as he once was. Young. Vigorous. Foolish.

The Phoenix didn't communicate in words. That was too limited for such a being. When it could, it spoke like this. A million messages communicated through images, feelings and memories. Impossible to misunderstand.

Most mortals could not handle it.

"My power wanes." The All-father didn't shout. He didn't need to. His words carried meaning. His mind brought understanding. "My people will not survive without me. Thor will die."

Odin held a baby in his hands and knew this would be the one. The son he could entrust the future to. And he had almost lost him. Gaea/Phoenix looked upon her creation and tilted her head in a bird-like manner.

"An invader has taken hold of Midgard." Odin's voice simmered with suppressed rage. "It has claimed hold of Thor's soul. And through him, my people. I need your help to save them."

An enormous White Dragon floated in the void of space, curled around a Jewell. It radiated Life and… something. Something the Phoenix was only beginning to understand.

Odin didn't grimace or show any outward appearance of his feelings. He didn't even allow himself to feel anything about the Elden Lord, knowing the Phoenix was reading him like a book.

This was the riskiest part of his plan. The unknown factor. Odin didn't know what relation the Elden Lord had to the Phoenix Force. He just knew there was one.

In their time together, Firehair often spoke about the images the Phoenix had sent her. The yearning for… something from a great White Dragon.

The Phoenix was obsessed with it, she had told him.

Odin had remembered that on the day the dragon descended. It was why he had not joined the other Skyfathers in their attempt to negotiate with the beast.

Anything that the Phoenix Force was focused on would not be simple.

But Odin could not allow the Elden Lord's presence to stop him. His wife, his son, and his people needed him.

And he needed the Phoenix.

"I ask for your aid for only three years." A year to gain control of its power. A year to excise the influence upon his people's souls. A year to wage war against the enemy. By keeping the term short, he kept the Phoenix from thinking of it as anything but a minuscule loss. "If there is any part of you that remembers me fondly, that cares for the boy you brought back, or that remembers the love I shared with your host, I beg of you three years. At the end, I shall personally bring you to the Elden Lord."

The Phoenix stared at him for a long moment.

Odin let its mind wrap him, delving into his mind as it searched for the truth of his statement.

He spoke the truth. Odin forced that thought to the forefront of his mind.

It wasn't simply a promise.

It was a sacred oath.

The Phoenix Force felt it. Felt his sincerity and honesty.

Yet its obsession was strong.

He had everything he ever wanted. The perfect host. Life. They were one. They were Free. And it felt… everything. All the emotions, those it had only tasted from its hosts, were felt fully for the first time. For a few seconds, the Phoenix was no more. The Dark Phoenix was a distant, forgotten memory.

Merged with Life, they were the White Phoenix.

Then it was gone.

Odin, for the second time, felt Heartbreak.

"I can give you that!" Odin promised. "Help me, and I shall stop at nothing till you are one with the Elden Lord!"

Either the Phoenix Force helped him save his son and people, or there would be no future. Creating the perfect Phoenix host into existence was a small price to pay, if a price at all, to see his people safe.

A trill of birdsong echoed across the darkness of space.

Odin allowed himself to feel hope.

Then he noticed its attention was not on him but on something emerging from Wonder Woman's shadow within the ship.

And Odin knew the Phoenix did not sing for him.

Author's Note:

One of the biggest hurdles I have faced with this story is how many characters and plotlines I must juggle. I have a massive chart filled with names, their goals/fears/abilities. And I have to narrow it all down into a story that is at least coherent and interesting. (It will never be plot-hole-free. That isn't how comic stories work.)

As with every comic book author, my understanding of characters is my own interpretation of them. Even discounting multiple universes, which mean different versions of the same person, some characters are just so... unexplored that I am left with my own interpretation of them.

The Phoenix Force, in comics, is pretty much a Deus Ex Machina that authors use for whatever the hell they want. What few moments of characterization it has shows it be massively affected by its hosts, leaving me to only guess at its character without a host. I settled on a slightly benevolent being (it regularly brings dead heroes back to life) that doesn't understand mortal worries. It is a being so far removed from mortality that humans and their emotions are little more than curiosity.

Then, it finds Jean Grey, the only host that allows it to truly FEEL. An otherwise perfectly compatible host if not for her lack of control. In comics, the Phoenix is drawn to Jean and her clones/descendants/family because of that. I have no intention of making Jean Grey a character in this story, but one cannot overestimate how much of an impact she had on X-men and the Marvel universe as a whole.

From the pathetic, prototypical damsel that was Marvel Girl to the Dark Phoenix to the White Phoenix of the Crown. In this world, she is dead, but the echoes of her existence can be felt.

In this world, Mikael has been just out of its reach for millions of years. Bathed in Dragon Aura, able to feel his Love without having it directed at itself. All these emotions it now has have context, thanks to Grey. But when it returns, ready to share its 'revelation,' he is gone.

Every action has a consequence. Even the actions we don't take.

I'll see you all next week for the last chapter of Consequences.

CONSEQUENCES VI

"I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death — and I refuse suicide."
-Albert Camus

Melina did not want to die.

She had felt death's cold touch before. The void of sensation had been a welcome relief at the time—the release from her duty, entrusting the future to her Lord and her Lord to Lady Ranni.

At the time, it had been liberating.

Now?

Death was not an option.

Even at her lowest, when Melina felt the most useless and small, she never even contemplated ending her life.

It was not hers to lose.

So she wouldn't.

What she was doing now was not some noble sacrifice, some twisted way to excise her useless existence in a dramatic display of martyrdom.

She had done that once before, and it had ended terribly.

More to the point, if she sacrificed herself again and again found out it was pointless, she would never live down the shame. She'd be forced to recuse herself to her room and never leave until everything, and everyone forgot about her existence.

No, Melina had gone into this with a plan. One she thought had a good chance of working.

The first step had been to convince Pride to bring her into Wonder Woman's shadow. It had been easy with the promise of a 'reward/punishment' from Mikael if they pulled it off.

Neither feared the void of space, but Melina was entrusting the Demon Lord to defend her from the League and the Phoenix if either tried to attack. Melina was not their equal in any way, but the manifestation of Raven's demon side was more than enough to defend her for long enough to teleport back to the Island.

It would be embarrassing to sneak off and then return with their tails between their legs, but that just gave Melina incentive to not fail.

And Melina didn't think she would.

If there was one thing she had learned over her time with her Lord, Mikael sometimes got too caught up in his head. In hypothetical scenarios and in his worries. Likely a habit of being alone for so long, it was a great tool when he wished to craft intricate plans, as he tended to catch things others missed. It nonetheless led to him overcomplicating things. And he tended to drag others along with reason and his logic.

Melina admired that about him, that force of personality that shaped the Lands Between into a better place.

If leaving this world to its fate was truly the only thing to do, then she'd accept it as would the others.

But it would hurt. He and the rest of the Family.

Not half an hour ago, she had been pleased with his efforts to form connections, and now he had to tear them apart again?

Melina did not want him to have any more regrets.

So, she had an idea that would solve most of their current issues with minimal risk.

Mikael would never allow it if she asked for permission or told him the plan.

Because it was her.

This was what she wanted, a way for her to be useful. To regain a purpose, one she chose herself.

This was Melina's own form of Freedom.

All she needed was a bit of time, a few minutes to communicate with the Phoenix.

She should have expected things to go wrong from the beginning.

Instead of appearing in the void of space amid a battle between beleaguered heroes and a titanic force of fire and energy, Melina and Pride emerged on top of a pile of sleeping bodies, limbs tangled in a mess.

It was lucky that the Amazon had been on top of the mound of heroes, or the two women would have had to dig themselves out.

"Where are we?" Melina asked, looking around the ship's tight confines and the pile of bodies.

"I can feel the Phoenix outside," Pride said with a frown as she softly kicked Tony Stark's hand away to free some space to stand. "It might have knocked them out. How weak. I dealt with all the cameras and surveillance equipment. No mistakes this time."

Melina didn't say anything as she looked around.

A ritual circle on the floor still glowed with fiery power, and the console of the ship's display was the image of the Phoenix in space. Robotic bodies floated by the screens powerlessly, including the gigantic Iron Man suit she had seen on Valeria's display. They hadn't been destroyed, only… turned off? Yet the ship was still powered, cycling air and

insulated from the dangerous void beyond. Nobody was dead, as far as Melina could tell. There were signs of battle, like singed clothing, but not an injury on their bodies.

The Phoenix Force had knocked them out and transported them rather than just blast them? That didn't fit with the creature Mikael had spoken of.

Still, the heroes were incapacitated, which was one less worry. If there was a third player here, they'd reveal themselves soon.

Melina nodded at Pride, who was poking the sleeping Sorcerer Supreme in the cheek with her foot and stepped towards the front of the ship.

…Or at least what she thought was the front of the ship. Grail Knowledge only gave her a basic understanding of electronic technology, and space fairing vessels were above its usual pay grade.

With nothing to stop her, Melina lowered her Information Defence.

Suddenly, her mind was visible for the universe to find.

The Phoenix trilled in joy, the sound a beautiful ring in the quiet of space. It was at once like the tinkling of wind chimes and the crackling of a hearth.

It was also loud enough that the ship shook and rattled by the vibration. The sleeping heroes slid along the ground as the artificial gravity lowered for an instant before re-establishing itself.

Melina kept a firm hold of the other Defences, especially Mind and Possession. The Phoenix wasn't cheering for her but for what it saw in her mind.

Melina was not a psychic in any way. Like the others, she possessed the Talent for it, but Talent was useless without ability. If there was a spell to read minds, the others of the Family would be able to learn it quickly, but until such an ability was developed, the Talent languished in uselessness for most of them, like a swordsman without a sword.

But the Phoenix was THE psychic.

Melina felt its touch upon her mind, the brushing of its existence against the walls of her thoughts, and if she didn't have the Defences, she might have given up then and there.

It was *vast.*

Melina had stood before gods, had felt the titanic power of the Erdtree, and bathed in the power of her Lord under his Command Seal.

The Phoenix was more than all of them.

Gods were nothing to it. It could burn the Erdtree with but a thought. The Elden Ring, the prize her entire world warred over for millennia, was but a glimmering bauble to it.

The closest comparison Melina was when her Lord granted her power, and even that was… limited.

Mikael's power was a lake with no bottom. Eternally, it fountained and flowed, never

running dry.

The Phoenix was an ocean. The seabed was there, miles down, but the vastness of it did not allow for any contemplation of the limit.

If this sea of power had brushed against Mikael's mind for eons, especially when he was at his youngest and weakest, it was no wonder he had reacted so violently to the knowledge of its approach. Like her Lord, Melina could feel it, though it couldn't influence her.

It was like standing at the foot of a dam holding back the ocean, knowing you were safe but well aware of the tides waiting to break upon you.

Melina was no one special.

If not for the Defences, she would have lost herself in those red waves, drowning in the power of life and fire.

And it would have welcomed her.

Anybody can become the host of the Phoenix. There was no requirement whatsoever. So long as it aligned with the bird's will, no life was too large or small. They all were embraced equally.

And they'd drown in a sea of psychic fire.

The Phoenix wasn't malicious. It just viewed all life equally.

A blade of grass was as important to it as a human life. The only reason the latter would have more import in its eyes was because humans were made up of billions of tiny lives. Yet even that was a red drop in the vast ocean of life.

And Melina would be another.

If only she had allowed it.

She didn't.

Melina had burned once before.

This fire would not consume her.

"You will not have him."

Her words echoed in the confines of the steel cabin. They were firm, sure and unwavering.

The Phoenix's trill turned into a shriek.

"You know I speak true." Melina continued, speaking to nothing, yet knowing the bird was reading her mind and could hear her. "You've seen my memories. I know Mikael. Better than anyone else, I know him. He will never allow anyone to into his mind and soul."

Melina felt something, thanks to Psychic Talent, but her Defences remained in place. She would not let even the tiniest fraction of the Phoenix Force into her until the deal was

struck.

Thankfully, she had enough experience with psychics to identify it was some method of communication, even if the Defences blocked it.

“If you wish to speak, do so in person.”

She felt it’s displeasure, but it knew she would leave if it attacked.

And as much as Mikael wanted the Phoenix gone, the Phoenix Force wanted Mikael more.

Melina channelled Mikael as much as possible. Many nights had been spent curled in blankets around a fire, talking for hours. They had spent years together, and Melina had never forgotten his words.

And she had learned a few tricks. Even when he was the weaker party, Mikael never negotiated from the lower position.

Leverage and compromise, he had told her.

That was the key to any deal. Both sides had to gain something. Otherwise, it wasn’t a deal. You always give up something. But leverage determines who gives up more, and knowing how to use what leverage you had was critical to achieving a deal you were happy with.

The Phoenix could see her thoughts. It knew her plan.

Yet it acquiesced.

Those memories, his embrace, and their long moments together were the sweetest temptations to the Phoenix.

Fire burned itself into reality before Melina.

The flames shaped themselves into a female form.

Crimson reds made up long hair, and pale fire curved itself into flickering skin. Green flames lit the eyes with an intense glow that pierced Melina’s soul.

Within an eye blink, a woman made of flowing flames was before the kindling maiden, staring at her as her body roiled in waves of smokeless fire.

Melina recognized the body. She had seen images of it. Jean Grey must have left an impression on this Phoenix for it to assume her form, even if it didn’t consider her its perfect host in this universe.

Melina was glad Mikael was not here.

He would have made so many jokes about the woman’s nudity.

‘Oh no, she’s hot.’ Or. ‘My inner pyromaniac has never been this hard.’ Or simply: ‘Smoking.’

… She had spent too much time with the man if she was making the jokes for him.

The Phoenix tilted its humanoid head at an angle in a bird-like fashion, long flames of

fair dancing with its movement.

"Why?"

The voice was perfectly human but contained a musical note, like an echo of a bird's song.

Melina didn't know what, exactly, the alien being was asking. Why was she here? Why was Mikael trying to run? Why did it need to talk like this?

Instead of answering any of those, Melina continued with her spiel. She needed to lead the conversation in a way she wanted.

"No matter what you do, he will never merge with you."

The flames that made up the woman darkened. Its face twisted in an almost overestimated expression of anger, like a child about to throw a tantrum.

"Why!" It wasn't a question. It was a demand. And the spaceship shook with the force of it. "We are life. Life is Life. We can be one. We ARE one."

"No," Melina shook her head softly. "You are not."

Pride had sidled up beside the kindling maiden, red eyes glowing in wary amusement as she kept her arms crossed below her chest. The Phoenix never gave the Demon Lord a single look.

Its eyes of green flame never left Melina.

"We will be."

A promise. A prophecy. The Phoenix said it with such grim certainty that Melina was reminded of Mikael's warning. If it meant getting to him, the Phoenix Force would burn the world and everyone on it.

And Melina knew what her Lord would do in response.

"Then you'll lose him forever."

The black flames sputtered and died.

"Why?"

The same question was asked for the third time.

Only the Phoenix spoke with such despair, such total heartbreak that Melina's soul ached with empathy. She knew what it was like to want something so desperately that it hurt, yet knowing with bone-deep certainty she would never have it.

Mikael hadn't been the only one to keep secrets during their travels together. Until the end, he had never known what she had been born for.

But Melina had known.

She had known that any future with him was impossible. Knew her role was to die and that her feelings would all lead to naught.

And she had fallen in love anyway.

Melina grasped that empathy, that kindred flame, and held it firm. Now was not the time to let it burn.

"Because he's scared," Melina said simply. The Phoenix tilted its head again, understanding Melina's words but uncomprehending their whole meaning.

This was why the Phoenix, able to pear into practically any mind in the universe, was seemingly so naive.

It existed on a level wholly different than any of the minds it touched. It could see everything they saw, but the context, the perspective, was simply too different.

The Phoenix Force simply *was*.

For all its power, for all its age and reach, the Phoenix was limited in one key area.

It had a purpose. A reason for its existence.

It existed to see life flourish.

That purpose defined it, empowered it and limited it. It gave the Phoenix a surety to its existence that other life forms lacked. It knew, in every core of its body, what its role was. So long as it lived, it would fulfill that purpose. If it died? That meant its purpose had been fulfilled, as it would mean no life was left.

Melina envied that, even as she pitied it.

She once knew her purpose, but she also knew what it was like to choose for herself rather than be confined to it as the Phoenix was.

She took that pity and bundled it with her empathy.

Its obsession with Mikael had started because of that purpose. It had found the perfect host for itself.

It was only recently that it could connect with a host well enough to feel emotions, and even then, they were raw and uncontrolled. And it wasn't 'its' emotions, but that of its host imprinted on it.

Maybe what it felt towards Mikael was love, affection, or other emotions, but it had no context for those within its purpose.

It saw Melina's memories of Mikael, but it failed to grasp the fear that drove him.

It knew *of* fear. It did not feel fear.

"We will be…" the fiery woman paused, searching for the right word to convey all it wanted. Talking was so limiting. "Perfect. Whole. Pure. Powerful. One. There will be no fear."

"That is what he fears." Melina wasn't good with explanations or communication in general. She was counting on her thoughts to give the Phoenix deeper context to her words. "He doesn't fear you. He fears himself. The loss of himself. He doesn't want to be Mikael, the perfect being. He wants to be Mikael. He'd take it if you gave him powers, but

that is not what you want. You want him. To be with him. You want to be one."

The flames flared brightly, stimulated by Melina's words.

"Yes."

"He wants to be two."

Melina was playing a risky game here, denying the Phoenix its wishes. If it was a simple case of being a 'Yandere,' as her Lord liked to joke about, the Mikael would have no problem working something out with the Phoenix. He was doing something similar with this world's version of Emma Frost, even if he didn't think it would lead anywhere.

But this wasn't the love of mortals.

Why would the firebird settle for something so… limiting as sex. The Phoenix did not just want to love and be loved by Mikael. It wanted to become one being with him. To be so close that there was no marker between where the Phoenix ended and Mikael began.

Nothing terrified Mikael more.

"We will be one." The Phoenix declared, eyes of green flame narrowing as the heat in the spaceship started to increase.

Melina had dealt with worse.

Pride giggled.

"Daddy does what he wants, Tweety Bird," the Demon Lord mocked as she started to circle the bird like a cat on the prowl. She rolled her hips in a sensual sway that promised sin and sex. "He IS one. He doesn't need you. But you need him, don't you?"

The Phoenix's eyes hadn't left Melina, but it wasn't as if this woman of flames was its real body or it was in any way limited to it.

A second Jean Grey, made of darker flames, walked beside Pride in an instant, her strides matching the Demon's perfectly, even if it lacked the sexuality.

"We will be one." Both women of flames spoke as one, even as they locked eyes with Melina and Pride simultaneously. It was one voice speaking with absolute certainty.

Pride's giggled louder.

"He won't kill you," Pride said, continuing her languid circling even with her tag-a-long. "He'll just leave. You'll never find him again." Both avatars of the Phoenix flickered and glared at the Demon. "Because you don't get it. You don't understand."

"I understand him!" The Phoenix argued, black flames rising in its body. "I know him. We have been together for longer than all of you put together. Millions of years."

"Then why does he embrace me and run from you?" Pride asked with a sneer.

The Phoenix said nothing, continuing to glare.

Throughout it all, Pride's mind continued to be shielded from the force of nature, but Melina's hadn't. Her thoughts and her memories transmitted the meaning of Pride's

mockery and how true it was.

"What's in it for him?" Melina suddenly asked. It saw her mind and knew the meaning of the question, but it didn't understand.

"We will be one," it said simply as if that would explain everything.

"Why would he want that?" Melina pressed. The Phoenix looked confused. "What does merging with you, becoming your host, give him."

"Power." The answer was immediate. "We could do anything. Be anywhere. Have anything."

"He has power," Melina said flatly. "Every second he breaths, he grows in power. Haki. Aura. Magic. He has so much power he doesn't have time to collect it all. He has all he wants. Family. Fame. Wealth. Eternal life. What can you give him that he doesn't already have?"

"Everything!" There was anger in the firebird's voice now. A glimmer of the Dark Phoenix. "All his enemies, gone! His limits? Gone! Together, we will be beyond anything we are apart. Anything we want, we will have."

Pride laughed, harsh and loud.

Melina did not bundle the emotion she felt away, allowing it to flow from her to the force of nature unrestrained.

Disappointment.

The Phoenix recoiled more from the emotion than it did the Demon Lord's mockery.

"Mikael," Pride said the name almost reverently. "'Like god.' That's what his name means. Did you know that, Tweety?"

"Yes."

"Did you know, of those two words, 'like' is the most important to him?" The Phoenix Force did not respond. "He doesn't want to be god. He doesn't want to be perfect or all-powerful. He wants the struggle. The failure. He likes his limits, even when they frustrate him. It means he is still mortal. He is still him."

Melina transmitted images to the Phoenix, her memories of the man.

Mikael burned in the fire of dragon's breath, skin blackening and lungs filled with flame. Dozens of limbs reached out for him, the grotesque form of the Grafted Demigod doing his best to kill the tarnished interloper.

Mikael walked out of a library, severed arm in hand, the weeping and wailing of its inhabitants flowing behind him.

Mikael was a ruined wreck. Exhausted from days awake and the concentration of coordinating multiple combatants against the mountain of a man. He died to the Starscourge multiple times already, and it showed.

Melina's blade swiped a curved slash at the Omen King's back. His tail blocked it, even as Mikael's sword swerved under his guard. Then they both retreated as golden blades rained from the sky. As one, they danced.

The battles were all different. Sometimes, he was alone. Others he had aid. He sometimes laughed as he fought, joking and mocking. In others, he was as silent as the grave. He got hurt, healed, and got hurt again. Every battle Melina had ever seen Mikael be challenged in were all fought differently.

But they all ended the same way.

Mikael was always smiling in the end.

"It was not a god that killed Trigon the Terrible," Pride said with dark amusement. "It was not a dragon or phoenix. It was a man. And I felt his emotions. He relished it. Not a single punch or attack was thrown, but the battle was everything he wanted. He killed the Lord of Madness with only his wits, a week's notice, his wives, and few illusions. The challenge, the risk of failure, and the triumph. Mikael wants the fear. And he wants to overcome it."

He was scared of merging with the Phoenix, yes, but more importantly, he wanted to be scared.

That was the dichotomy of the man. He hated the fear, but he clung to it.

Mikael liked to think he was simple, but like everyone, he had layers of motivations, fears, desires, and goals. It all made sense to him, so it looked simple, but Melina knew the hypocrisy in the man. She had spent decades with him.

The only time Melina saw the fear recede was when he sunk himself into his Great One aspect, which was one reason Melina tried to prevent that as much as possible.

"He isn't looking for an easy life," Melina said plainly. "He is looking for Life and Freedom. Both need challenges."

Mikael would never say it because it was an objectively terrible thing to say and would anger his wives, but Melina was sure he was happy that the 'Oppressor' existed. He was delighted that there was some threat out there that was challenging him, pushing him to think, react, and plan. It was one of the reasons he was trying to solve the issues instead of running. Even the Phoenix was only an issue he would avoid for a time because there was nothing to gain, nothing to overthrow or defeat.

Mikael wanted challenge. He wanted to fear an enemy and still defeat it.

He was always looking for his next Wall.

"I want that!" The woman's flames flared bright and black as she glared at the two women who denied her. "He doesn't want power? Fine. I'll keep my power. But we will be one!"

The spaceship shook, and the metal started to boil. Melina knew it was made with materials specifically to avoid such an occurrence, but the power of the Phoenix Force was not so easily thwarted by mortal hands.

"If you do not offer anything, why would he want that?" Pride mocked. "All you've talked about is being one with him, being perfect, or how powerful you'll be. A man who has everything does not need you."

The Phoenix Force's flames continued to rise, and metal twisted. The seating of the ship tore itself from the bolts of the floor and levitated in the air as psychic energy warped space. The sleeping heroes were not unscathed. Defenseless, they, too, rose and twisted in the air. If this continued, they would be little more than debris floating in space soon. Some might survive, but others certainly wouldn't.

The Phoenix knew what the two women were doing. It could see it in Melina's mind. See her plan and the goal she was working toward.

But, just because it could see the plan didn't mean it could stop her. Because it was reading Melina's mind, it knew nothing they had said was wrong.

"Two things stop Mikael from joining with you," Melina laid out the fact simply. Now that Phoenix had shown the extent of its emotions, she knew she had it. "His fear of you and lack of benefit you bring. We have a psychic already. A reality warper is nice but not needed. We were preparing to invent one. And his fear is justified. Even your most compatible host is influenced by you. You'd try to do the same if he let you in."

The Phoenix didn't deny that.

That was what it meant to be one with someone. Each 'person' assumed the others' goals, mindset, desires, and emotions. What they were before ceased to exist, and something greater emerged.

The Phoenix Force wanted that, knowing it wasn't death but growth.

Mikael didn't want that, seeing it as the death of himself and the creation of something new.

Both weren't wrong.

"He's planning on running from you," Melina said unnecessarily. It saw her mind. It knew that. But she was laying everything out. "Forever. You will never get your wish. Unless you work with me."

The Phoenix knew the stick. Now for the carrot.

It had seen the plan, but it lacked the reasoning behind it. The emotional aspect was crucial and it, with its infantile grasp of only the strongest emotions, didn't understand the subtle complexity of Melina's emotions.

The Phoenix Force simply didn't understand the melange of motivations, fears, and

hopes in the plan. It understood Melina loved Mikael, desired to be useful to him, and was looking for a purpose, but why she came up with this plan, why she went ahead of it without alerting him, or how she hoped it would work was all beyond the force of nature.

It knew Melina. It did not understand Melina.

“I offer you an accord.” The one-eyed woman said, staring into green flames. “I will be your host.”

“I don’t want you.”

That was the plain truth laid bare.

The Phoenix didn’t want anyone but Mikael. It had let Jean Grey, its theoretically perfect host, die so that it could return the White Dragon. It knew Melina’s plan had been to become its host as soon she had bared her mind to the firebird. But it failed to see why merging with the woman would benefit its goal of becoming one with Mikael.

Melina would never force Life to become one with the Phoenix. In fact, the psychic entity knew the woman had no intention of even encouraging Mikael to take the bird from her. For all intents and purposes, Melina’s goal was just to be the host of the Phoenix and do… nothing. Sure, she could gain power and be more useful, but Melina had no direct plans to use that power.

Being the Phoenix host was not a step towards helping further her goal. Melina’s goal was to be the Phoenix host. That was it.

Anything after that was up to Mikael, the Phoenix and the Family.

The Phoenix, a slave to its purpose, could not understand how someone could want power and not use it.

It was always moving towards its next host, to the next world to burn and revitalize, towards corruption or decay that needed to be cleansed.

“Become my ally,” Melina insisted softly, extending an arm to the woman of flames. “Join with me, and I shall take up your purpose as my own. I will guide you, and you will learn. About Mikael. About love.”

“I don’t want you,” it repeated. “I want Life.”

“There has only been one being my Lord has ever become one with.” Melina did not retract her hand. “And you are not her.”

The flames of the Phoenix darkened to a black pitch. It could see the woman in Melina’s memory.

Emma Frost was the psychic of the Family. With her there, they didn’t need the Phoenix.

Emma Frost was the one who had called out, taunting the Phoenix with its greatest desire only to rip it away cruelly.

At that moment, had Emma Frost been there, the Phoenix would have destroyed her.

"But you could be."

Black flames froze.

"My Lord allows Pride to read his emotions," Melina explained, bringing up the memories easily. Pride puffed out her chest with… pride. "His mind and emotions are never hidden from Family. They wouldn't be if I could read them too."

Black flames flickered red. It was a temptation the Phoenix couldn't ignore. For millions of years, it had pressed against Life's mind, never able to truly know it. To have access, to truly understand its obsession…

It wanted that. Badly.

But it wanted to be one with him more.

"Should you accept my accord, we will become one. He will never leave me. And, if I wish it, he will not force you out." Melina had complete faith in her Lord. He'd need convincing, but so long as the Phoenix was not a threat or forcing Melina to act against her will, he'd allow it to stay.

But he didn't want to. That's why he never brought up the option of having one of them act as its host. That's why the Phoenix needed to be the one to make the first step. The first concession. If it wanted Mikael to come to trust it, it would need to prove it wasn't a threat to its host.

"Work with us, and he will come to trust you," Pride urged. "Prove your usefulness, your benefit to the Family, and you will have hope for one day achieving your dream."

"I don't want hope. I want Life." Less of a declaration, this time, the words came out in an almost pitiable plea.

The Phoenix Force simply didn't understand why all this was necessary. It had never negotiated for anything. It had never wanted anything. It simply was. It simply did.

To it, the answer to this problem was simple because there was no problem. Become one with Life. It was a desire, a want, a goal.

Everything after that wasn't worth thought because it would never need more than a thought to achieve its goals from there.

"Take my accord, and he will resent you for years," Melina continued. "For centuries after that, he will distrust you. Millennia, from now on, he will accept you. When this universe ends, he might trust you. Eons from now, you will become one."

All Melina offered was hope.

To the Phoenix, the deal seemed so… wrong. It gained nothing but a sub-optimal host in exchange for no promises of achieving its goal.

"Eons," it tasted the words on lips of red flame. "Even to me, that is no small time. I

was offered Life in three years."

Both Melina and Pride's eyebrows rose. It was the Demon who asked the question.

"By who?"

That was when Odin struck.

He had veiled himself when arriving, hidden from even the likes of the Sorcerer Supreme. While he had dropped some of his security to converse with the Phoenix, as soon as he noticed the arrival of two of the Elden Lord's consorts, he had hidden himself again.

Every technique he knew was used to hide from the Daughter of Trigon.

He was Odin, the god of magic and wisdom.

He knew a lot of techniques.

Initially, he had only sought to learn about their goals, abilities, and any information they would provide about the Elden Lord. No matter how the battle with the Enemy progressed, the White Dragon was not a force to be ignored.

From this conversation, Odin now had a firmer grasp on the mind of the Elden Lord and how he would be able to coerce or convince the beast to aid him.

He needn't work against the Family. His only goal was to save his people. As a king and god, he had his duty and would not mind making deals to accomplish his goals.

But he needed the Phoenix. It was the only force of rejuvenation that Odin knew could save everyone he cared about. It had brought Thor back to life when he was first born to him and Gaea. Other items or beings of power were simply too out of reach for Odin to grasp.

Odin was the last God of Earth. It's last hope.

If he could trust the Elden Lord, they might work together.

But Odin couldn't.

He could not see the dragon's fate. It was veiled from his sight. And, knowingly or not, the Elden Lord had served the Enemy's plan too perfectly. Either they were working together, or the beast was so easily led around that he was an unreliable ally. Worse than an enemy.

For the same reason, he could not allow the heroes to gain the Phoenix egg, he also could not allow anyone else to be its host.

Odin was weaker than he had been in millennia. Without the full power of the Odinforce and so far from his last Odinsleep, he was weaker than most common gods.

But power was not everything.

Wisdom was a power greater than force.

So Odin waited for the time to strike. The Demon had initially kept its guard up, but after minutes of not sensing anything, it focused on the Phoenix as the only threat.

So many objects and bodies had floated in the air, and the room was filled with flames, so nobody had paid attention to the blade glowing red as it was wreathed in stolen flames.

The Amazon's sword, already a divinely made weapon, was empowered by stolen Phoenix flame as it sliced the four-eyed woman in half.

Pride only had time to widen her red eyes as she fell apart into shadow.

Her death gave Melina time to dodge, her curved blade flashing as it deflected the flaming sword.

Odin had prepared for that.

He didn't want to antagonize the Elden Lord, and killing his wives was a surefire way to anger the dragon. He couldn't afford more enemies at the moment.

He just needed the Demon Lord out of the way. It was only a part of Trigon's Daughter and not even her true self. It would either reform or return to the main body.

He had minutes, at best, to finish this before the entire Family descended on him.

"Who's there?" Melina asked, even as she deflected another blow from the flying sword.

Odin had not made the mistake of revealing himself that many others would. It would be best if no one knew who had done this.

The sword continued to attack, and Melina continued to dodge and deflect. It was impressive, especially considering the tight confines of the ship. She was not the most powerful of warriors he had seen and certainly not the fastest, but she was nimble and creative. She even used the Amazon's unconscious body as a shield, the sword unable to pierce deeply into the red and gold armour.

Odin idly wished he was wielding the sword directly. It had been too long, and only manipulating it by magic limited the speed and force he could move it, especially as he split his attention to the real trap.

But it was enough.

Melina's foot fell upon Steven Strange's sleeping body, ready to use it as a springboard to jump over another swipe.

Fire consumed her as the ritual circle below her feet lit up with red flames.

Melina's blade tumbled from limp hands as she fell to the ground. She was asleep before her head landed.

It wouldn't injure her.

The spell was the same one he had stolen from the Sorcerer Supreme, the healing rest Strange was planning on using against the Phoenix using its stolen power. All those under it would wake up in even better health than when they had fallen asleep. And, Odin noted

with a bit of wry amusement at the irony, the woman might even regain her eye.

It would just be a while before they woke.

The Elden Lord would have no cause for vengeance and, after everything Odin had just heard, might even thank him for dealing with the Phoenix Force for a while.

Through it all, the Phoenix flying in space and its avatar in the ship did not move to intervene in any way.

It did not care who won the fight. Both sides had promised it what it wanted. It didn't care about anything but its purpose and Life, its perfect host.

Even with the need to save time, Odin waited a few moments to ensure the sleeping woman wasn't faking it to trap him.

Only after he was sure she was trapped in his spell did the one-eyed god reveal himself to the Phoenix Force again. He was still outside the ship, so he focused on the actual Phoenix Force, not its avatar.

"Three years." He repeated to the bird as he opened himself up again. With his new insight into the Elden Lord, he was even more certain he'd be able to keep his promise. "Help me save my people; you will only need to wait three years."

Odin saw himself as the Phoenix saw him. Old. Weak. But familiar and wise. It remembered him from when Firehair loved him. It remembered him from working together over millennia. It remembered Thor, the baby it had brought back. The infant god had been the closest thing the Phoenix could claim to be its child.

But Odin also saw the one-eyed woman through its eyes.

Also weak. And unfamiliar. But Melina knew Life better than it did. She had been so sure of her words. She had been certain that the White Dragon would run if it tried to force the issue. It had seen her mind and seen her love. That emotion that so taunted the Phoenix Force.

The Phoenix Force wanted Life.

But it also wanted Life to want it.

But it had been so long. Too long. It finally had an opportunity, one it had been missing for millions of years.

It could wait eons for a guaranteed outcome.

It just didn't want to.

And it didn't know what the correct answer was.

One promised Life soon and was wise enough that its plans usually worked.

The other promised Life and Love, but it could wait for so, so long.

Behind his grey beard, Odin smiled.

This had been the woman's mistake. She had been honest, yes, but also too direct. A 'do this, or else' accord did not affect the Phoenix Force as it would a mortal. It didn't

understand the concept of threats. Her ignorance of the firebird's way of thought showed through when she forced it to communicate through words.

But Odin had known it for thousands of years.

The Phoenix Force could be swayed as one would a gushing river.

So, rather than threaten or coerce the Phoenix, Odin directed it down the path he wanted it to take.

With its power, he would heal his people. With it and his people, he'd wage war upon the Enemy and banish them from Midgard. In doing so, the Phoenix Force would prove its usefulness to the Elden Lord and its trustworthiness by only doing as Odin directed.

It wouldn't control him. It would only work for his purpose. Seeing that, the Elden Lord would wish the Phoenix for himself.

It was a childish gambit based on jealousy, but it was one the Phoenix could understand. It also played into what Odin knew of the White Dragon.

It liked to take control of factors, and if the Phoenix was an active participant, the Elden Lord would want it on his side once he saw what it could do.

In some way, the Elden Lord's consort had even helped Odin by focusing its attention on being compliant.

Open as he was to the Phoenix, Odin could feel its approval of his idea, and he prepared himself to welcome the power it would give him.

But he was cautious enough to have never let his surveillance of the ship fall, so he heard the two words that undid it all.

"Rule Breaker."

A blue moon rose in the dark of space.

The Phoenix, the spaceship, and all its inhabitants were gone.

Odin was alone in the dark.

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Melina woke to a jagged dagger sticking out of her chest and Medea giving her a look of exasperation.

With the instincts of battle recent in her mind, she was on her feet in an instant, curved blade ready to defend herself.

No attack came.

"What happened," Melina asked, keeping her eyes roving around the spaceship.

Pride was still gone, and the heroes were still sleeping, but beside Medea, the only other occupant was the avatar of the Phoenix. The woman of fire had made no move in

the entire skirmish.

The ritual circle was dark again, and the sword no longer glowed with stolen Phoenix fire.

“Raven, Ranni and I came to retrieve you,” Medea said with a slight scowl, her eyes locked on the Phoenix. “We’re in Ranni’s Diorama with the Phoenix. Whatever attacked you is either in here with us or outside, where it will deal with Raven.”

“Perfect timing,” Melina nodded, putting her back to the witch and keeping her eyes on a swivel.

The Phoenix tilted its head in that bird-like motion once more.

“You are Medea,” it said simply. “Another of Life’s… people? Lovers? Things?”

It said each word slowly as if tasting it on the tongue, but none felt right to the bird.

“Wife,” Medea answered, Rule Breaker still clasped in her hand and cloak glowing with power. Then she spoke to Melina, not bothering to try and whisper. “We’ve been here for a few minutes under my concealing spell. Watching.”

“Why did you not say anything?”

The stillness of the spacecraft was eery after the frantic battle of only a few moments ago.

“We wanted to see your plan,” Medea drawled sarcastically. “It almost worked, but you should have investigated the bodies first.”

Left unsaid was that once the sword attacked, they had remained hidden to defend her just in case and find the attacker.

“No.” the Phoenix denied. “It didn’t. I had a better offer.”

“From who?” Medea asked. “The one controlling the sword?”

“Odin promised three years.” The Phoenix Force saw no need for secrecy. Tricks? Deception? They were so far below the sapient force of nature that it never even thought of them.

“Odin?” Medea muttered a few choice words under her breath. “Of course, gods will continue to make our lives difficult.” Then she spoke louder. “If you are here, King of Asgard, come out. We will talk. You did not wish to kill, so long as you parley, we can have peace.”

Nothing happened.

“He is outside,” the Phoenix answered.

Neither woman took the Phoenix at her words, but a blue doll did appear beside them, holding one of Dragon’s unpowered drones.

“She speaks true,” the Goddess of the Chill Moon said. “Naught but us, the Phoenix, and this dross is in mine Semblance.” She threw the bot on the pile of unconscious bodies.

“The God fled when Raven assaulted him with her full might.”

Now, the women relaxed slightly.

“Why have you brought me here?” The Phoenix asked. “I don’t care about you. I want Life. If you bring me to him, I will thank you. Otherwise, I will burn you and go to him myself. Or to Odin.”

“He will not see you,” Melina answered.

There was only one reason Mikael had sent these three to her instead of coming himself. He did not want to exacerbate the Phoenix situation, and all three of these women had ways of escaping the Phoenix without it catching them and bringing her home.

Melina also noted that these women would be most able to rescue the Heroes if they, too, needed to flee the Phoenix. A coincidence, or was Mikael more concerned about them than he let on?

“Our Lord knows of thy approach,” Ranni said in the usual monotone of her doll. “He shall ever flee from thee beyond the bonds of thy reach.”

Melina let the tiniest of frowns darken her face.

Mikael knew she had left and likely suspected where she had gone. He had sent these three to retrieve her.

But they hadn’t.

They had watched and listened to her talk. That left one question.

“Does he know what I was going to do?” Melina asked softly.

Medea side-eyed her, but the miniature Raven that appeared on her shoulder, wearing a pink cape, cheerfully answered.

“He knows,” Happiness chirped. “I’ve been communicating everything to him and the original. He was going to summon you if anything went wrong. Pride is sooooo mad.”

Melina wondered at that for a moment, but Ranni provided the last piece of the puzzle.”

“Our Lord Husband’s message was thus.” Ranni affected a lower, rumbling voice in an imitation of Mikael. “’Last time I didn’t trust you. This time, I will. On one condition. Come back to me.’”

Melina took that in. And what it meant.

In less than an eyeblink, the Phoenix was there, both faces of flame pressed close to Melina’s face as it stared at her. Green eyes of flame bored into her one eye with wide shock and crazed desire.

The ship glowed a fiery red as the Phoenix blazed.

It had been reading Melina’s mind this entire time. It knew the thoughts she had as soon as she did.

Ranni's doll tried to blast it away with a shard of crystalline magic on instinct, even as Medea wrapped herself in her cloak and launched herself back, magic circles springing to life around her.

The avatars of the Phoenix, its fake Jean Grey bodies, ignored them both, the magic passing through it without doing any harm. Its entire focus was on Melina and her mind.

"Life… wants me?" It asked with almost reverent awe.

"He wants to be able to trust you," Melina clarified. Piecing what she knew of the man and how he would see the situation. "He doesn't want to run from you. Should our accord flourish, he will not need to. He accepted the risk. But you need to take the first step."

The Phoenix was silent, giving the words and thoughts consideration.

It didn't want to wait eons if Mikael ever came to trust her. It didn't want a host that wasn't compatible, as it lessened the emotions it would feel. It didn't want this situation.

It simply wanted Life.

But it wanted Life to want it back.

Medea cleared her throat, and Melina looked at her while she waited.

"Don't ignore the subtext of his words," the Greek witch said. "It has to be you that comes back. How are you going to let it in while remaining you? You are an exceptional fit conceptually. Physically, you are only slightly superior to the average person. You are not a psychic, despite the Talent, nor do you use fire. For the Phoenix to express itself through you, it must supplant you. Unless you have an answer for me, I will have him summon you back, and we will leave."

The Phoenix remained silent, not giving Medea any of her attention.

Melina knew what she meant. Conceptually, she had excellent compatibility. Even ignoring her death, the fact that she had returned to life resonated well with the idea of a phoenix. Her efforts to bring Destined Death back to the Lands Between were reminiscent of the Phoenix Force's burning of planets to rejuvenate life on them.

But physically? She was probably one of the weakest of the Family, and her specialty lay in magic, not anything psychic. Melina couldn't even claim expertise with Haki, the closest the Family had to psionics, as she had not focused on it.

But she had a plan.

"I needed Pride for that," Melina said, and the miniature pink Raven waved its hands excitedly. Melina looked at Happiness and asked her for the last puzzle piece. "I need his blood. As much of it as you have."

Medea's eyes narrowed in thought as three large barrels emerged from her shadow.

"I see," she murmured, looking from the barrels of blood to Melina to the Phoenix.

“You are close enough to the next Tier that I don’t think there’s too much risk.”

The Family was usually judicious with its use of Dragon’s Blood. Its purpose was to raise the Tier of anyone who imbibed it over time, each rise accompanied by the need to consume five times more than the last.

But each power increase necessitated retraining and getting used to new abilities before they advanced. And the higher the Tier, the greater the expansion of their powers. So caution was warranted, even if some of the women of the Family had started at such a high Tier that they had not even advanced once since their first summoning.

To be cautious, everyone only consumed three litres of blood each day, one litre condensed into a pill by Medea for every meal.

It was a slow but steady growth, reflecting how cautious the Family was of every aspect of the Catalogue. It also was a matter of material availability. Getting from Tier 9 to Tier 10 for one person took almost fifty thousand litres of blood. Sixty thousand if they had started from Tier 1.

To get every woman in the Family to Tier 10 would take between six hundred and fifty thousand and seven hundred and eighty thousand litres of blood, depending on their starting Tier and external factors.

Unless they spent all their time drinking blood, raising anyone to their highest point would take years. There was talk about increasing the daily dosage as they rose in Tier, but it was simply better logic to take their time.

Melina didn’t know what Tier she was considered when she first met Mikael. She and Ranni came from a world not included in the Catalogue Mikael had filled out. All she knew was that after two months of taking in Dragon Blood, neither of the women had seen a measurable increase in power, meaning they had been at least Tier 7.

Melina personally thought that was an overestimation of her abilities.

Through testing and conjoining records from the Dream, the Family had found that one gained a draconic aspect when they consumed enough blood to take a Tier 1 to Tier 7. Even Artoria or Diana had become dragons when they reached that point, though they had started as Tier 8 and 9, respectively.

Melina had taken in enough to get to Tier 6 and half the amount needed to get to Tier 7. She and Ranni were only a few months away from becoming Dragons and gaining their own Elements.

But that was close enough that they could force the issue.

“There shall be no second chance,” Ranni said. “Hast thou given this appropriate thought?”

“I’m sure,” Melina said softly, eyes drifting back to the thinking Phoenix.

“I’ve decided.”

That was all the warning Melina got.

The avatar, shaped like Jean Grey dissolved into a stream of fire and flowed towards the kindling maiden.

And stopped.

Melina closed her eyes and lowered her Mind and Possession Defences to the Phoenix Force.

Mikeal had been the bait, the incentive to gain the Phoenix’s cooperation. From here, it stopped being about him.

It was now all about the Melina.

The dam burst.

And she burned.

The fireproof spaceship did not stop the flames from flowing from the Phoenix to its newest host.

Melina burned.

It hurt. A lot.

But she wasn’t dying. She was just… small.

Without the Defences, the full brunt of the Phoenix fell upon her once more. Her flesh crackled away in fiery power only to regrow in an instant. Her body was breaking down. Nobody at her level could contain the full power of the Phoenix Force.

And through it all, Melina felt it.

Felt its mind, its desires and its purpose.

Its presence was so massive, so grand, that it was accidentally wiping her away.

The Phoenix didn’t want to kill her, but it was like a star hurtling through space. It burned planets to ash with just its presence.

She was drowning in a psychic lake of fire and could do nothing to stop it.

At some point, Melina had fallen to the ground, writhing in pain as more and more of the Phoenix filled her.

“Raven!” Medea called. “Get Mikael to summon her back and free her! It’s too much!”

“No,” Melina gasped.

She was burning again, her greatest nightmare made real.

Yet… the pain was nothing.

Nothing compared to the fires of the Forge of the Giants.

Nothing compared to dying for her Lord.

Nothing compared to saying goodbye.

Melina had burned before and still could wish her love the best. Now, consumed in

flames once more, she had no problem saying one word.

"Blood."

A crimson tide flowed into her mouth, drowning her even as the flames of the Phoenix continued to burn. It kept her alive as it killed her.

But the iron tang of blood was like water in the desert.

Even with Medea actively using magic to soothe the flow of blood down her throat, even with Melina's inability to actually drown, even with the Phoenix forcing more of itself into her soul, it took minutes before she felt the change.

Through it all, Melina focused on herself. The love she felt, the memories that made her who she was, and the joy she had felt when she first woke in the Mansion.

And she focused on the Phoenix, her sympathy for it, and the hope they both held.

And on their shared purpose.

"OUT!" Medea shouted as scales sprouted from Melina's skin.

Ranni did not teleport the woman away. Instead, she forced the spaceship and its sleeping inhabitants from her Semblance, leaving the three women and the Phoenix as the only occupants of the Diorama.

Only they and the blue moon overhead saw the transformation.

This was the uncertainty of the plan.

A dragon's Element was as much an ability as a manifestation of the person themselves. While it was only expressed with one word, there were differences between people with the same Element based on who they were.

By gaining an Element while being the Phoenix host, Melina hoped it would aid her in being its host. Maybe not the perfect host Jean Grey or Mikael would be, but one close enough that she could control the Phoenix Force without worry of self-destruction.

But it came at a cost.

Melina was giving up her personal Element for one that represented them both as one.

And the Phoenix Force was the much greater entity.

She would not return to her true Element once it left her.

Melina knew that, but she had considered it worthwhile. And she had a few ideas about what it would be.

Light, like Artoria, was a possibility, given her spells. Like Tsunade and Mikeal, Life was even more likely given her healing magic and what the Phoenix represented. There was also the possibility of more esoteric or specific Elements, like Phoenix, Psychic, or even Death.

But deep down, Melina knew what it would be.

Melina burned as the Phoenix finished merging with her.

Clothes burned to ash as flesh turned red and gold.

Scales grew and grew, longer and thinner than the rest of the Family.

Wings of fire, glowing resplendently in golds, oranges, reds, greens, blues and white flames, burst from her back.

A tail sprouted, long and feathery. Closer to a bird of paradise than a lizard.

Melina burned.

But it did not hurt.

And the Dragon of Fire cried out in musical birdsong.

Fire was basic, dull, and incredibly common as far as dragon Elements went.

But Melina had been born to burn.

She was Fire.

A Fire that burned for others.

And the Phoenix Force burned for all.

With one mind and will, the dragon that looked like a phoenix opened a portal to the Island.

As they passed through, they transformed back.

It was a woman with fire-red hair, with one eye the colour of firewood and the other of flames, that landed on a dining table surrounded by a worried Family.

Mikael only had a second to be surprised before his lips were captured in a passionate, fiery kiss.

Author's Note:

I'm a bit late with one, as I've been sick for half the week. But I wanted to get it out rather than push the finale to next week.

I seriously contemplated writing a fight scene between Medea and Odin. Dragon of Magic (who hates gods) vs God of Wisdom and Magic. In the end, I couldn't justify it. Odin would not throw himself into a battle in his condition, especially not against a foe that had plenty of reinforcements waiting in the wings.

More to the point, this arc was never about big battles or climatic showdowns. It was about characters dealing with consequences. Lacking in catharsis? Maybe, but there will be plenty of that later, so I felt it was acceptable to focus on the characters. Both the Phoenix Force and Odin still have roles in the story, obviously, but so do a lot of characters. I am narrowing down my focus as we approach the end.

Now, I half wrote this while sick, so I am going to go pop some pills and lie down.

I'll see you all next week.

SIDE STORY III:
SIDELINES

"You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength."
-Marcus Aurelius

Batman's hands carefully didn't twitch as the drone teleported out.

Instead, he maintained perfect control over the device, knowing focus was paramount. Losing himself to his fear would not help his missing friends.

"Approaching the last recorded location," Dragon's voice came to him from the control panel. The feed from one of her suits played along the screen next to his.

"Acknowledged," he answered.

They were the only two actively participating in the mission that hadn't gone dark. The AI had lost contact with all her suits sent to battle the Phoenix. Either they were destroyed or rendered inoperable in some way. Now, both were using backup, and thus sub-optimal, equipment to determine what had occurred with their comrades.

Batman did not have high hopes, knowing just how dangerous the Phoenix Force could be, but he needed to know.

He needed to see what became of his friends.

The darkness on the screen was not encouraging. If the Phoenix Force was anywhere nearby, it would be visible from thousands of miles away, blazing like a fire in the dark.

Thankfully, there also wasn't much in the way of debris as would be the case if the ship had been destroyed.

Batman kept calm as his and Dragon's sensors pinged off an object in the vast expanse. Their drones only took a minute to get close enough to identify one of Dragon's suits.

"External damage, minimal," the AI reported. "Internal operating system is fried. Literally." Snark. A coping mechanism. Dragon was also worried.

Batman did not jump to conclusions. Ever since he had slightly relaxed the restrictions on Dragon, she had been able to operate up to six suits simultaneously. Finding only one in relatively good condition was not cause for celebration or worry. Yet.

"Was it destroyed before we lost contact?"

"No. They all failed simultaneously," the small, fake image of a woman on his screen cocked its head as if she was seriously giving the issue some thought instead of having

already run the situation a hundred times through simulations. “This one is the only one not in active motion when I lost contact.”

Batman simply grunted, acknowledging the point she was making.

If this one was still here, and the others weren’t, it was likely they hadn’t been taken by something but floated off in whatever direction they had been moving when Dragon lost control. With no resistance in the vacuum of space, they would have conserved their velocity when Dragon lost control.

“Projected locations if they are drifting,” Dragon sent his way and lines of light were overlaid on his screen, going in various directions. Some were far, and others were barely a mile away. At the speed of the battle, some of the suits were far away by now.

It was a simple equation for her to calculate since she had the data before contact was lost.

“The flyers and the ship,” Batman asked gruffly, directing his drone to one of the nearest ones to verify or deny the hypothesis.

“My best estimation is based on final estimated position, motion, and projected flight paths.” New lines appeared on Batman’s screen, bright red instead of yellow. They went much further than the estimation of the drones’ locations. Even Dragon’s best tech could not match the speed of most of the flyers. Two large lines overlapped, one going much further into the distance. “My predictions for the ship, depending on whether the thrusters continued to operate.”

Batman idly wondered if it wouldn’t have been better to not focus so much on the space vessels’ stealth features, as it would make tracking it down harder.

Then he remembered the capabilities of the other space-fairing races of the universe and decided it had been a good call, even if it would make the search harder.

They found the second drone in another minute of searching the projected location, lending credence to the drift theory.

From there, the pair split. Batman sent his drone on course to the nearest path to intercept one of the flyers, Iron Man, while Dragon sent her suit after the spaceship.

This took much longer due to the distances involved, but they were aided as Dragon continued to field more suits as she got them ready for impromptu space travel. They would pursue the other flyers.

They had only lost contact with the ship for ten minutes before getting their drones to the last known location. Five minutes searching for the drones and establishing the drift theory.

Batman found the Iron Man suit eighteen minutes later.

Drifting through the dark of space, completely powerless, the ‘Phoenix Buster Armor’

towered over Batman's three-foot tall, ten-foot wide, bat-shaped drone.

Bruce's heart sank as he stared at the human-shaped body of metal. Scans revealed no signs of heat from the machine or a human-shaped body inside.

Unsurprising.

The void of space was not a slow killer.

Yet, even as Batman feared he would find another friend he would need to bury, he did what he could to verify Tony Stark's fate.

With delicate control, he landed his drone over the center of the armour. It had been designed to combat the Phoenix Force, so nothing this lone drone could do would damage it. Thankfully, Batman had helped build it and knew the emergency access hatch location.

Tiny, robotic claws extended from the Bat-drone and carefully removed the hatch. From there, it was a simple input of code to release the armour's core compartment. Batman took his time, knowing one wrong button press would lock him out and, depending on the severity, possibly destroy the armour entirely.

It still only took another minute for the Bat-drone to access the small room Tony used to operate the Titanic amour.

With a steel heart, Batman directed his drone to open the door.

With a rush of depressurized air, the capsule opened.

Nothing.

Instead of the limp, lifeless body of Tony Stark, as Batman feared, all his screen showed was an empty cabin.

Batman's mind raced, putting together what he knew of the situation.

They had lost contact with the combat team simultaneously, which implied a certain level of power. There was no other way someone could deal with two Kryptonians, Wonder Woman, a Green Lantern, the Phoenix Buster Armour, Captain Marvel, Eidolon, and a ship filled with some of the most powerful and skilled magicians Earth had to offer.

Occam's razor would mean the Phoenix Force was the culprit.

Perhaps it had gotten fed up with their efforts to impede it and wiped the attackers out. It had been a risk the combat team had been aware of, but nobody had thought likely.

The Phoenix simply didn't care about them, further supported by their initial clash and siphoning off its power. They had been fighting its aftereffects more than the creature itself, trying to delay it so Strange could gather more power. But it might have discovered their plan and decided to wipe them out.

But then where was Tony Stark, and why were the Dragon Suits and Iron Man Armors intact?

The Phoenix Force would have destroyed them if it wanted to kill the interlopers. Or,

if it only used mental attacks, Tony would have been left within his armour.

Either Stark's body was utterly destroyed, unlikely given the lack of marks within the cabin, or it had been brought elsewhere. Which, given Batman had just verified it hadn't been unsealed before his arrival, had implications.

A third force had been participating in their battle against the Phoenix.

One that was responsible for the disappearance of Tony Stark. And, more than likely, the cause for the loss of communication in the first place.

Both Batman and Dragon realized simultaneously, in the microseconds after discovering the empty armoured core.

"Did your sensors discover any energy signals that should not have been there," Batman asked as he directed his drone toward the nearest flyer's estimated location. He had been forced to make compromises for his space drone for it to be small enough to pass through the teleporter, limitations Dragon didn't have with her suits.

"None. Traces from Green Lantern, Captain Marvel, the ship, the armour and my suits. The few unknown foreign energy signatures match the powers Eidolon used."

"Magic," Batman grunted in dissatisfaction.

That was one of the few energies of significant effect that they couldn't scan for.

Despite his scowl at the word, a part of him was pleased.

The absence of Tony's body meant that he had been moved somewhere. There were only a few reasons to move a corpse and a lot of reasons to move a living person.

Batman had buried friends, family, lovers, and fellow heroes. He knew he would have to do so again.

He never wanted to.

If there was any hope that his colleagues, his friends, were still alive, he'd take it.

Less than a minute later, one of Dragon's suits arrived at the projected location Eidolon would have drifted to, only to find nothing.

No news was good news in this case. Luthor had been unconscious since losing communication with his projected double, and they couldn't wake him up. Its destruction should not have negatively affected him, but there was some concern that something was influencing the senator from the hero, but without finding it, Batman couldn't be sure.

It only took three more minutes for her suit to reach the ship's estimated location if the power had been cut like the armour. It wasn't there, however.

Either it had continued to fly under its own power, passed in an unexpected direction, been taken in its entirety by whatever took Tony, or the others were piloting it after communication had been cut off.

The latter wasn't likely, as they would have sent someone to deliver a message, but it

was possible if all the flyers were not in shape to travel without the ship.

“I’ll have two suits continue to follow its flight path,” Dragon said, and Batman nodded.

“Call back the rest and have them stationed at regular intervals to scan for their approach to Earth.”

His own Bat-drone returned to the Phoenix Buster Armour and acted as a relay point for their teleporter to pull both to the construction facility. With any luck, most of the data would still be recoverable from the machine. If there was anything to be pulled from it, Parker would find it.

While waiting for Dragon’s notice, Batman occupied himself with organizing the Justice League’s patrols and duties to cover a possible extended absence of some of its most powerful members.

That took less than five minutes.

He reviewed cases, updated himself on current global trends, what zones were in active conflict and which were peaceful, evaluated the rebuilding progress of destroyed cities, and checked to see if the Elden Lord had done something absurd in the last five minutes.

That killed half an hour.

Batman spent another hour in extreme physical exercise. He was already in his peak physical state and would see no new improvements without some sort of augmentation, but he always spent time ensuring he stayed in perfect condition.

Once he had finished his exercises, Batman floundered for a half second on what to do. He couldn’t leave, not while he waited for Dragon’s report, but staying and staring at his screen and waiting for news was a waste of time.

Then he remembered the samples of Essex Corp.’s new medicine he still needed to review.

It took Batman a second to find the appropriate package, one of many delivered to a fake address and teleported in for his review. It was below the clothing samples for possible upgrades to League costumes, tissue samples from newly registered Supers that weren’t a high priority, and beside Khonsu’s severed arm.

Opening the small crate, Batman noted with a frown that the packaging was substandard.

The placement of the medication was such that the vials of crimson liquid would not break upon transport. Still, no temperature controls, insulation, or extra protection to prevent thievery. Essex Corp was not known for their laxity in security.

Batman’s frown deepened, knowing that with security like this, tones of the liquid

would already be on the black market. If this medicine was truly as miraculous as purported and without side effects, it would not go to those who needed it most.

It was a concern for tomorrow. For now, he would simply run it through all his scans.

This wasn't the first time some sort of universal panacea had been 'discovered.' Usually, the medicine came with severe side effects, only worked in limited cases, was created through amoral processes, or was incredibly expensive to make.

Taking one of the crimson vials, Batman extracted the liquid and started running it through the usual tests.

The first was always to test composition. While it wouldn't give him its manufacturing process, it would let him know if any harmful components were added, such as cancerous material or Super substances, like Fear Gas.

Batman had the single greatest catalogue of samples of various elements on Earth and possibly beyond. Everything from Kryptonite and Endbringer flesh to Klyntar and Skrull DNA. Mineral, biological, technological, and even metaphysical, he had samples or scans of it.

It was all wasted when the result arrived in less than a minute.

Batman frowned as he read the results.

Blood.

All that was in 'Sanguine' was blood. While it lowered his opinion on Essex Corp.'s naming sense, it didn't explain its healing properties. But why hadn't it coagulated? And its molecular structure was… odd. DNA was almost wholly absent, and the only reason his scan determined it to be blood was the familiar forms of red blood cells within.

It wasn't human, thankfully, but it also didn't match any records he had in his database from the numerous other species humanity had encountered.

Batman frowned, tapping at his computer as he sent it to the next testing stage.

The fact that it was just blood, if alien in nature, didn't necessarily mean anything nefarious was happening. It was suspicious and merited further investigation, but it was not a crime yet.

Pulling up the FDA records of their approval of the substance, Batman spent ten minutes reviewing the information.

The information was… odd.

For one, the material listing was precisely in line with what his devices told him was in the medicine. According to the listing, 'Sanguine Summum,' the official name, was a blood substitute made to imitate the powers of 'Elixir,' a mutant with advanced healing powers after he died in one of Leviathan's early attacks.

Not only did it accelerate the body's healing, but it allowed for advanced cellular

development, possibly beyond human limits. The corporation listed ‘superhuman physical development’ as a long-term result.

Again, that was not a rare claim. There had been any number of ‘wonder drugs’ claiming to help regular people develop powers. Batman was aware of half a dozen sold in local pharmacies that were entirely placebos.

The only thing off about the application was the speed of its approval.

It was listed as approved over a month ago, but Batman’s customary paranoia had him double-checking the FDA’s shipment records. Their earliest recording of receiving the medicine was right after Heartbreak. Even with the low red tape required of medicine in the wake of Endbringer attacks, that was nowhere near enough time for proper testing. Likely, bribes had been involved to expedite the process and backdate it.

A quick scan of foreign countries’ pharmaceutical regulations departments also painted the same picture.

So, what was going on?

Essex Corp. hadn’t lied about the material composition, so they weren’t afraid of it being replicated somehow. And, despite the speed of approval, testing was ongoing. So, what was the end goal here? Did they simply want to capitalize on Heartbreak to make more money in the conflicts that followed and rushed things? Or was there a more nefarious motive?

Even if Sanguine was a genuine cure-all as it was purported to be, even if it allowed people in peak physical condition to push past human limits, there was every possibility that it could be used for other means.

He’d continue to run it through every scan he could, but he’d also send it out for other experts to weigh in on potential risks it could pose. Batman would need Strange - or someone else if the Sorcerer Supreme was… unavailable - to verify it wasn’t a magical threat before he would allow any of the League to use the medicine.

While Batman ran the blood through an exospectrometer designed to detect alien energy radiation, Dragon contacted him again.

“I found it.”

Within seconds, he had switched the bat-computer back to the Dragon suits’ feed, spotting the ship hurtling through space with thrusters at full blast, just as it had been a few hours ago when they lost contact.

It looked intact. Almost perfectly so, in fact.

It was hard to tell in the dark of space, but there didn’t seem to be any damage on the ship. It continued to speed along, propelled by gravity-based thrusters designed to not give off any detectable signatures in the void of space. It was lucky it wasn’t going at full speed,

or they would never have caught up.

Still no sign of the Phoenix Force.

“I’m patching in,” Dragon reported as her two suits approached the vessel. Inputting the code on the access hatch, a panel opened, allowing her to connect to the control of the ship. “All coms are down. So are all cameras, even the ones hidden within the wiring. I’m blind inside.”

“Open the hatch,” Batman told her. The ship was still functioning, so it had power. And the cameras were in separate systems for redundancy, meaning communications and cameras were specifically targeted.

Whoever, or whatever, did this, they wanted to be anonymous.

“Entering.” With careful maneuvering, Dragon directed one of her suits into the containment bay, closed the hatch again, and repressurized it with air. The other suit remained outside, carefully examining the area for anomalous factors. “Life support systems are all green. Ship controls are operational. I can pilot it home.”

Batman didn’t say anything, keeping a careful eye on the feed from the Dragon suit inside the ship.

Despite the ship being intact and operational, the insides were a disaster. Supplies, tools, and objects were thrown haphazardly around, some damaged and destroyed while others looked relatively intact. Batman didn’t see any direct damage besides what could be caused by kinetic force. There were no ashes, blast marks, or other signifiers of active combat from the heroes.

He took it all in, made his deductions, and formed a hypothesis in less than a second.

Then he saw the pile of bodies, and the tightness in his chest lightened.

“They’re alive,” Dragon reported, directing her suit to approach carefully. “And they’re all here. Even Stark.”

More than alive, they looked pristine. Not one was injured, despite the state the rest of the ship was in. They were pilled up in a tangle of limbs, breathing deeply as if asleep. Just like Luthor, attempting to wake them did not achieve anything, and they continued to sleep.

With confirmation of the safety of his friends, Batman directed Dragon to continue to look around the cabin for more clues on what occurred even as she led the ship back towards Earth.

The manual controls were a mess, like the rest of the ship’s interior. Anything loose had been tossed about chaotically. There was no pattern to be found, which was a pattern in itself.

The only other clues the pair found, at least at the moment, were material warped

from intense heat and slash marks from a blade. It matched the width of Wonder Woman's sword, but it wasn't impossible for it to be something else.

After reviewing all they could find for the moment, Dragon was left to pilot the ship back and alert Batman of any changes.

Only once communications were cut did Batman allow the relief to set in.

It was never easy being a human in a world of gods. Bruce's intelligence and skills earned Batman a Thinker and Tinker rating, but he was only human at his core. Replicating Stark and going to the frontlines with Powerarmor was a possibility, but one that didn't leverage his abilities to their most significant effect.

The simple fact was that for many missions the Justice League took on, Batman was better suited to act as mission control, only taking the field when he knew he had the tools to solve the issue.

It didn't lessen the fear of losing his friends. Every time, he wondered if this would be it, if they would face something he couldn't help with, and he'd be forced to watch them die.

A small, traitorous voice in his mind wished he could be more.

Batman's eyes slipped the box of Sanguine, and his mind conjured ideas of what he could do if he were not confined to human limits.

Then he shook it off. For now, his role was to discover what had happened, where was the Phoenix Force, and what the League needed to do about it.

Something powerful and subtle had interrupted their operation. Likely using magic, it had incapacitated some of the League's greatest forces. More than that, it had either done it without injuring them or healed them afterwards. Then, it released them to float through the vastness of space until they woke up or were discovered.

While this likely meant whatever had done this didn't have outright malicious intent towards the heroes, the extent they went to to guard their identity was suspicious.

Batman felt he had a reasonable guess who was behind this.

It wouldn't be the first time the Elden Lord orchestrated a plan to gain power for himself or one of his Family.

Batman would wait for his colleagues to wake up before confronting Mikael. He'd get their testimonies, check the Iron Man Armour, and watch the Elden Lord for any changes.

A small part of Bruce hoped he was wrong.

The Phoenix Force was too dangerous to be in anyone's hands.

******

"SPACE!"

"SPACE!!!"

Medea watched her lover take off, a cheering Valeria on his back as they both echoed their silly cheer.

Mikael was in his lesser dragon form, the one his avatars could turn into, to not alert others of his 'apology flight' with the young girl. The Greek witch pretended not to notice the shimmer of air, almost heat haze, that followed behind the flying pair.

Since Melina merged with the Phoenix Force a few days ago, she had been… clingy.

She still rarely talked and claimed to still have control of herself, but her emotions were a lot more noticeable. The fires in her left eye would rise and fall, changing colours with her state of mind. Emma claimed her nascent psychic powers, only at the level of reading surface thoughts for the moment, also acted as an almost television broadcast.

Mikael had kept a close eye on her, much to her poorly hidden pleasure, but it would be a while before the Kindling Maiden was practiced enough in her control to be let off the Island.

If the Caster was less confident in her husband's ability to navigate the woman's newfound power, she'd be more worried. But Mikael knew what he was doing.

…Most of the time.

Still, seeing the new Fire Dragon literally simmer in jealousy when he paid attention to his other wives tickled Medea's sadistic side.

Not that Medea wasn't slightly jealous herself. Melina had gone from potentially the weakest of the Family to the strongest once she gained control of her powers. She wasn't the perfect host for the Phoenix Force, even with her new Element, but it was a good enough fit that she had torched kilometres of the Island when she practiced.

Medea shook off her stupor, setting herself to her tasks.

After the initial Phoenix crisis, the rest of the Family returned to their duties to help the world recover from Heartbreak. Medea's task, housing or the displaced of Beijing, was largely automated with her Dragonbone soldiers still at work carving out the city, so she had been left to 'watch' Melina.

Not an issue if the woman/psychic force of nature decided to follow Mikael.

It left Medea time to do her other tasks that she had been putting off for a while.

In a few days, Mikael had promised her a full-day date. Getting all tasks out of the way first was best so there'd be no interruptions.

Most of her tasks involved projects in her Workshop, but a few were on the Island.

With a swirl of her cloak, Medea teleported herself above the entrance of New Thymescria.

Strictly speaking, the name hadn't been officially decided yet, as the Amazons didn't know how long they'd be living there, but it would do for now.

Looking around, the Greek witch nodded approvingly at the area's development.

The settlement was placed in a hidden valley within the mountain range across the Island's southern side, cutting it off from the north. The valley itself was large but with only a few access points.

It was less than a kilometre from the boundary field she had put up so long ago to keep the more destructive creatures from the mansion. By keeping so close to the magical boundary, the Amazons could close off one possible avenue of attack. It was also defensible, only accessible by air or a few narrow paths through the crags.

The warrior women had erected walls and gates from thick trees and stones in the few entrances. They were always manned by at least two guards, and four more patrolled outside the valley, overlooking it from the mountainsides.

Rudimentary magical defences were in place as well. Nothing Medea was impressed by, but it would serve as a decent enough if they decided to continue to improve on them.

From her position in the air, Medea saw that the Amazons had diverted a mountaintop lake to flow down in a waterfall that filled a large basin and flowing river for them to use. A dozen or so buildings had also been built, just enough to keep the Amazons from the elements and clear space for their use.

Altogether, it was a decent start for a village, especially considering the limited number of occupants and the relatively short time since the women had been displaced. It was nothing compared to the paradise of their old home, but none of the women looked forlorn or lost, bustling as they were to and fro as they worked to improve it.

Medea mentally congratulated them as she descended from the sky in front of one of the newly built gates. Already, they were damaged from some sort of conflict. Dark red stains pockmarked them from blood splatters. Some of it was fresh enough to gleam in the light.

Upon seeing Medea descend from the sky, one of the three guards left in a run towards the valley center, and another glared at her, hands tightly gripping her spear, but the third waved her down as she approached.

"Lady Medea." The Amazon bowed in greeting. "What brings you today?"

"I am here to see Hippolyta," Medea answered easily, unbothered by their caution or hostility. Compared to what she had dealt with when she was alive, the glaring guard seemed cute. The fact that it was only a tiny minority that was hostile, and they knew better than to antagonize their benefactors, made it easy to ignore them.

"The Queen has been called," the polite guard nodded. "Is Lady Diana with you

today?"

"No, she had other duties."

"And." The Amazon paused as if hesitating to ask more. Then she continued in a softer, more subdued tone. "Will Lord Mikael join you as well?"

Medea carefully didn't allow her amusement to show on her face.

"No, it is just me." It became measurably harder to not smirk when both guards sighed at the news. The glaring one in relief and the polite one in disappointment. "He believes it best he keep his distance until you are all more comfortable and settled in. He is aware of your traditions and has no wish to infringe upon them, even if this is his land."

"That is considerate of him," the nicer Amazon said with a smile. "Would you like to wait for the Queen inside?"

"No need," Medea didn't hide her smile this time. "I won't be here long."

This entire thing was a polite formality, a fiction they were all aware of. If Medea wanted in, none of them could stop her. Nor would they be able to keep Mikael out if he did want to visit.

Strictly speaking, Medea didn't even need to visit. She could just deliver her message and parcel with a spell. But she had been curious about how the Amazons were doing, and there was no need to antagonize them.

Also, a not-so-small part of her felt simultaneously sympathetic and vindicated when she looked upon the tribe of women betrayed and abandoned by the gods.

Medea was not above petty pleasures like this.

It only took a minute of further waiting before the wooden gate opened, and out stepped Hippolyta in her full armour.

And she had an unexpected companion.

"Medea!" Medea shouted in exasperation as she saw the fat cat with wings riding on the Amazon's shoulder. "Where have you been?"

"Pardon?" Hippolyta asked in confusion as the chubby feline blinked round eyes at her namesake, then flapped too-small wings to crash into the witch's chest.

"This is Medea," the Caster sighed as she dutifully scratched the fat floof where her wings met her back. "She's Mikael's cat."

"I… see," Hippolyta said slowly, still clearly baffled.

"He named her before he met me. It can be confusing, but don't worry too much."

"Ah," the Queen of the Amazons nodded in understanding. "Still, it is good to know she is not a threat. She has been with us for a few days, and we were unsure what she was. She also has been eating at least half of all the prey we have brought down."

The witch gave the cat a questioning look with a raised brow.

“Mrow.” The cat mewled in response, puffing out its chest in pride, completely unashamed.

Somehow, Medea was sure the cat was saying something like, ‘I only ate half. That deserves a reward. Give me treats.’

“It’s for the best you didn’t attack her,” Medea sighed again and resumed her scritches. Medea purred. “Even if you could hurt her, which I am not sure you’d be able to, Mikael would have kicked you off the Island. If you were lucky. He loves this cat.”

“Good to know,” Hippolyta said, giving the fat floof a more evaluating look. The other Amazons around had tensed as well. “Should we be aware of others like her? And how powerful would you say she is?”

“She’s unique,” Medea nodded. “As for how strong?”

There was a pause as the witch gave it some serious thought.

The cat was bound to Mikael, as were the rest of the pets. And like them, the cat was given one of his blood pills every meal. She should be nearing Tier 7, all things considered.

But Medea the cat was unique in an advantage she had over anyone else.

“You remember what Mikael looked like through the portal,” Medea eventually asked by way of answer.

As one, all the Amazons shuddered in horror and paled. One of them, the glaring one, stepped back and almost fell off the wall.

“Yes,” Hippolyta eventually answered, mastering herself much quicker than her fellows.

“Mikael regularly feeds her one of those tentacles,” Medea said with a wry smile. “As a snack.”

From Dragon Blood alone, the cat should be at least tier 8, just because of all she had consumed over the few months Mikael had been sneaking her ‘treats.’

“Mrow?” The fat cat perked up, looking around as if Mikael would be here with her favourite food.

One of the Amazons vomited.

“No,” the Caster said sternly to the tubby tabby. “He’s not here.” The cat wilted. Her tail, ears and wings drooping in disappointment. Medea rolled her eyes. Like her owner, the cat was a drama queen. “I’ll give you a treat when we get back. But don’t bother the Amazons too much. They are friends. Not food.”

“Mrow.” The fat cat mewled its displeasure at the chastisement. It knew what to eat and what not to eat… most of the time.

“I… see,” Hippolyta said slowly, staring at the floof in horror and looking slightly nauseous herself.

“So long as you pamper her, you don’t have to be afraid,” the Greek witch advised kindly. “She’s just a big puff ball, isn’t that right? Whose the cutest floof? You are, aren’t you?”

The fat floof relished in the attention, purring even louder as her namesake lavished her with attention.

The walls of the narrow canyon rumbled with her purs.

“But that does bring us to why I am here today,” Medea said as she pulled a book out of thin air with one hand and used the other to rub under the feline’s chin. “This is for you. Mikael listed everything you might run into on the Island.”

‘You Died!: Mikael’s Guide on How to Git Good!’ - Was printed across the front in large letters.

“That is… very kind of him,” Hippolyta said as she took the book and started flipping through it.

It was surprisingly thick.

Medea knew as soon as the Queen found the Table of Contents by the face she made. She had made her own copy of the book.

Mikael had a lot of fun writing it.

The first ‘chapter’ title was innocent enough.

‘Pets: Hurt them, and I’ll find you.’

The likes of Torrent, Medea (cat), and the four drakes were described in detail in that one, with surprisingly well-drawn images.

The names got weirder from there.

‘Skeleton Wheels: The Grind.’

‘Basilisks: If you think you know where their eyes are, you are stone cold wrong.’

‘The Many Species of Dragons and Drakes: A Suicidal Scaly’s Solacious Sexy Catalogue.’

‘Food: Mean, Lean Cuisine.’

‘Dogs: Man’s Worst Nightmare.’

‘Caelid.’

‘Trees and the Many Ways Nature Wants YOU Dead. Yes, YOU specifically.’

‘Bloodborne: Kill it with Fire. This isn’t a joke. Kill. It. With. Fire. And never get their blood in you, or I’ll kill you with fire. I’ll do it too. I know where you sleep.’

Those were a sample of the titles of the ‘chapters,’ which varied in length, breadth, and warning level.

“This is,” Hippolyta frowned as she continued to flip through it, seeing pictures, diagrams, and even a pop-up of a large chest. Pulling a little tab had the chest standing on

too-long arms and legs and opening a maw of teeth with a fleshy tongue that wiggled back and forth. ‘Mimic’ was listed under the chapter titled ‘IT’S A TRAP! (not that kind)’ “Quite thorough.”

“He still thinks you’ll eventually all die if you don’t leave,” Medea said casually. She wouldn’t deny the amusement she felt at seeing the Queen deal with her husband’s… eccentricities. “But he doesn’t want you to, so he made it so you might survive another century or so.”

“It is appreciated,” Hippolyta paused on a particular page and looked up to meet Medea’s eyes. “Convey our thanks to him, would you? And let him know we continue to follow his request, even if it is more challenging than we thought.”

Medea didn’t grimace, even as she wanted to, at the reminder of the Amazon’s ‘tithe’ to her husband.

The less she dealt with puns, the better.

“I’ll let him know,” she said instead and prepared to leave, cat in hand.

“One moment, Lady Medea,” Hippolyta stopped her. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“What for?” The witch asked with a raised brow.

“We were attacked by one of these,” the Amazonian Queen held up the book to show her a picture.

‘Carthus Sandworm’ was a towering creature, tens of feet wide and hundreds long. Its enormous mouth was open like a flower, revealing rows upon rows of sharp teeth. Its entire body was covered with bone protrusions, like those on a spinal cord, only sharpened into blades. Mikeal’s notes included terms like: ‘Shoots lighting’ and ‘Immune to poison and frost.’

It was in the chapter ‘From beneath you, it fucks you up.’

“We slew it without too much issue,” Hippolyta continued. “But we discovered something in its tunnels and would like you to take a look.”

“I have a few minutes,” Medea nodded, curious to what they found. Not even the women who had spent an entire year on the Island knew all its secrets. Only Mikael did. “Lead the way.”

Well aware of the Amazons’ physical abilities, the witch returned to the sky as Hippolyta directed her fellows on guard that she would return soon. They saluted, and the two women took off, the fat cat still in Medea’s arms and uncaring that they were moving faster than most cars.

Hippolyta ran through the narrow crags of the mountain quickly, navigating their confusing paths easily as Medea floated behind her.

They reached the ‘cave,’ a circular tunnel that was in no way natural, in less than a

minute as it was relatively close to the Amazons' valley.

Without hesitation, both women descended into the dark bowels of the mountain, neither having trouble seeing in the dark.

As they descended deeper and deeper, Hippolyta navigating the crisscrossing tunnels as if she had a map in her head, Medea couldn't help but speak up.

"I will let you know that Mikael knows every inch of this Island." While he wasn't omniscient most of the time, anything within the Dream was under his view. "He never told me anything about something under these mountains, but he will know about it."

"While that is good to know," Hippolyta called back, voice echoing in the tunnels as she continued to run. "I just wish to confirm that it isn't a threat to my people. We are still early enough in construction that it would be better to move now if we are too close to something we shouldn't be."

Medea didn't begrudge the woman her caution, so she kept silent as they descended deeper. Even at their speeds, it took a good ten minutes to reach their destination.

Medea knew they had arrived as soon as the walls ceased to be the carved stone from the worm's passage and instead became flat and square, clearly indicating intelligent construction rather than natural formation.

It was a large room, easily bigger than the tunnels, and long enough that it took another few seconds from their arrival point near one end till they reached the other.

Stone stairs rose from the floor till halfway up the wall, and Hippolyta took them quickly, arriving on a rectangular platform. In its center was a round basin, a brazier, made of metal.

Against the wall were two great stone doors, undercoated and pockmarked, set into a rectangular frame. Grey ash swirled in the air.

"We were not sure what lay beyond these doors," Hippolyta said as she stopped beside the brazier. "We sensed nothing, but it would be better to verify with you before we continued to explore."

Medea didn't say anything either as she looked around with a frown.

As a rule of thumb, the deeper something was underground on the Island, the more dangerous it was.

Mikael had never said anything about this place to Medea, but that wasn't surprising as it was buried deep and possessed no entrance before the Sandworm tunnelled through. Mikael tended to not communicate things if he didn't think they would come up.

Some things, like the Phoenix, came back to bite him, but the vast majority of his century of imprisonment or millions of years sleeping were irrelevant in day-to-day life.

Medea looked around, noting the smaller braziers beside the door and the other

details carved from stone.

The cat in her arms squirmed, freeing herself and flapped tiny wings till she landed in the large brazier before the door. She circled it a few times before curling herself into a ball at its center.

She was asleep instantly.

“Best if you do not progress further,” Medea eventually told the Amazon. “I’ll ask my husband and tell you what he says, but it does not seem dangerous, so I do not believe you will need to move.”

Hippolyta accepted the answer readily. Her people had too much going on to worry about strange doors just yet.

Medea continued to look around curiously.

Every part of the Island was fashioned from some part of his journey through his prison worlds so he would know this place.

But Medea had never seen or heard of any man-made structure on the Island but the Mansion. It shouldn’t be possible, as the Island was only supposed to take in creatures and natural environments that he encountered. It led to a few questions.

What was behind those stone doors?

Was this the only structure, or were there others hidden deep underground?

And why did Mikael not bring it up?

SIDE STORY IV:
HEARTBEAT (ADULT)

"In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into Flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit."
Albert Schweitzer

I stretched, arching my back in a curve with a satisfied groan. The benefits of the catalogue did away with the annoying aches and pains I used to feel, but there was satisfaction about stretching even if I knew my human form was nothing more than a shell.

Maybe it was just a habit from when I was mortal, especially after a night of physical activity, but I still found myself doing these small, pointless, and I was in no rush to stop them.

"Mhmhm," Yoruichi mumbled as she rolled over in bed, pulling the blankets around herself into a ball with only her head sticking out.

I chuckled at the adorable sight and kissed her on the forehead before throwing on some shorts and one of my terrible floral shirts and leaving my room.

I'd dress appropriately for my day with Medea later, but I wanted to be comfortable during these early mornings.

I faked it well, really well, actually, but I was in no way an extrovert. Dealing with people exhausted me. Even people I loved, like my wives, sapped my energy from me. I had struggled with it most of my life before I learned to 'fake it till I make it.'

You can't be a shy, introverted businessman and expect success. Networking, social gatherings, and sales all require a certain amount of charisma that I had been sorely lacking in my youth. Thankfully, contrary to what the media portrays, you can train in that. And I got good at what I do.

My one true superpower was the ability to bullshit my way through life.

But, every once in a while, I need to be alone. To hold up with no one around to bother me, look over my shoulder, or exist in the same space as me.

Some 'me' time, where I could pretend I was the only person that existed.

It wasn't a lot, especially after centuries alone, but I still felt the urge to enter 'gremlin mode' occasionally, where I'd hole up in a dark room with a book or game and ignore the world for hours.

That was very hard to do when you were literally the 'big deal' of the planet. Between

giving my wives the attention they deserve, heroes, pets, and juggling so many plans, I had little time to escape it all. Besides a few hours of flying every day, I had decided to forgo hours of sleep.

It didn't cost me anything, as I couldn't get tired, and it would ensure I was available most of the time. I never slept alone, so I fell asleep with my partner of the night and woke in a few hours to spend a few hours with a book or game.

I had found it a great way to de-stress.

Speaking of…

Looking around, I didn't see my most recent source of stress.

Melina knew today would be all about Medea, so she wasn't waiting outside my room as she had been the last few days.

I let out a sigh of relief.

I didn't have a problem with Yanderes, especially if their threats were manageable, and I preferred to keep an eye on my Maiden and her… passenger, but I needed space. A few days of constant following me around was fine, as I could check for the Dark Phoenix and be ready to Free her, but it could not continue forever. It simply wasn't realistically possible to always be together.

Also, I would go insane.

I didn't mind spending time with the women I cared for, I enjoyed it, but someone looking over my shoulder had always been a pet peeve of mine. It made the hackles on my neck rise, and I got twitchy.

Today was half date, half experiment to see if Melina could handle being away from me for an extended period of time.

She claimed it shouldn't be a significant problem and that she stuck so close because it calmed the Phoenix and made learning to use its power easier, but I was going to put that to the test.

I kept an eye out for the heat haze that accompanied the Phoenix host these days as I made my way to the kitchen to grab some coffee before I retreated to my man cave to finish the book I had been reading. Afterward, I'd get dressed and take Medea out for the day.

Turns out my naughty witch had other plans.

Medea was already in the kitchen, bustling around the room as she cut ingredients, kneaded dough, and set the food to cook.

She was the picture of domestic bliss, a happy little housewife cooking with a cheerful pep in her step as she hummed a little song to herself, slightly swaying her hips to a beat only she could hear, and a content smile on her face as her pointed ears wiggled with joy.

She looked so happy and content that I had to stop and watch for a moment.

It was easy to forget, in the frenetic day-to-day life of living in a comic world or in the memories of my time in prison, but all my wives came from traumatic backgrounds. All of them had lost their home worlds, friends and families.

They had died.

Most catalogue fics I had read before never really put much attention on the loss the 'waifus' faced. Too often, something like that was brushed over in favour of the sex or in the 'hunt' for new women or power. That was fine if you just wanted porn, but a story or real life?

How can a story ignore something like this?

I couldn't understand that. Not when I looked at this beautiful creature, so full of joy and life. How can you ignore the emotions, dreams and goals of the people who were very much real to the story's protagonist?

I was living a male fantasy, I knew.

I had the power to destroy planets. I was living in a fantastical world straight out of comics. I had unlimited potential and would never die unless I did something idiotic. I had the love of over a dozen beautiful women, and I would soon be a father.

I had fought for every second of this life but achieved my happily ever after.

Sometimes, when I was feeling down, I wondered if it was all real. If I wasn't still in the cell or the Kiln. If this was just a fantasy of a mad mind left to rot.

But then I'd see something like this and realize it all over again.

This wasn't just my fantasy.

It could be as simple as a good fight for Scathach, as dangerous as scheming against a Demon Lord, or as complicated as reuniting Diana with a version of her friends and mother. This was going to be their fantasy, too. No matter what it took, I wanted this life to be a happy ending for all of us.

We had all dealt with tragedy and pain. I didn't want to live like that anymore. It was time for joy, laughter, and love. That was the type of 'fantasy' I wanted to build with my Family.

Besides myself, it was Medea who was fighting for that future the most. Even with all the pain and betrayal of her past, she was the one fighting fiercest for this Family.

I was struck then by a memory. It was one from my time in the prison and thus was not carved into my brain. I hadn't thought of it or remembered it in literal eons.

"You can't for now," Medea corrected.

I wanted to interrupt. To protest my inability to genuinely return her feelings since fake ones nearly surpassed my self-control. I wanted to avoid leading them on. I hated

those wishy-washy protagonists who couldn't say yes or no. If I couldn't return their feelings because I was always fighting the implanted ones within me, it would be better if they moved on.

She held up a hand to stop me from speaking.

"As I said, I'll be waiting. We will. I look forward to the day you can look me in the eyes and say these words to me."

She was so beautiful. The bright moonlight full moon shown through the belfry glittered through her hair. Her dress fluttered in the sea breeze, dancing along her curves. I wanted to capture those lips in a kiss that would never end. Her eyes shown like jewels, firm and determined, as she stared into my soul.

"I love you."

Then she was gone, disappearing through the pale white portal.

The feelings were fake.

This love couldn't be real.

Nothing I had ever felt was this strong, this all-consuming.

The feelings had to be fake.

The words slipped out anyway.

"I love you too."

Nobody was around to hear the confession but the moon and the sea.

Just as they were the only witnesses to the wet splotches on ink-stained paper as I desperately tried to write down everything that had happened in the last few hours before it faded from memory.

I'd lose these notes when I passed to Dark Souls 3, but I wanted to hold on for now.

I wanted to remember those three words, at least for a little while.

When I was done, I carefully stowed my notes in my bottomless box, protected by as many layers as possible.

Then I picked up my chipped sword, donned my battered armour, and returned to where I belonged.

The fantasy was over.

It would be ten months before I would see Medea again.

The feelings had to be fake.

I wished they were real.

I don't know how long I stood there, hidden and watching the woman I loved cook with a stupid smile on my face.

If anyone asked, I would claim I was caught in my memories and emotions.

That, plus the somewhat obscure angle of the kitchen from my position, meant that I

did not notice Medea's clothes the entire time I stood there like a lovestruck fool.

Or lack thereof.

See, she was wearing her usual apron. It was a pale purple thing that covered her from chest to knees. Across the abdomen was a chibi witch string, a bubbling cauldron, and the caption 'Witch Wife' in curving letters.

It was enchanted to keep stains away, so she didn't have to worry about any nice dresses or fancy clothes she had under the apron when she cooked a veritable feast every meal.

It was also all she had on.

It took me far too long to realize that Medea was cooking in the middle of the night in a Naked Apron.

What could I say? Love is blind.

Still, I was in love, not invalid.

I wasn't going to let this go without the proper response.

But I had to be careful. Medea was a Dragon of Magic. She would sense me the second I cast a spell around her.

Thankfully, I was very good at sneaking around, and she was caught in her own little world. I was almost caught in her own little world, too, when she continued to hum and bob, facing away from me as I approached. Her tight little ass swayed before me, luring me in to make a noise and reveal myself.

Thankfully, I knew how to control myself.

I reached right outside the kitchen, hiding behind the wall that separated it from the bottom of the stairs.

I waited until she was at the opposing counter.

Then I struck.

"AH!" Medea moaned as I slid into her warm cunt, my shorts and shirt long discarded.

I grinned, one hand snaking under her apron to grab her breast while the other pulled her ass flush against my hip.

"Somebody was looking to be caught," I growled through a smile as I pulled my hips back and slammed them forward, plunging myself deep into her sopping pussy. I pulled back again, going extra slow as my dick caught on every fold and ridge. Then, I slammed myself forward. "Did you know I was there?"

I had been prepared to cast a lubrication spell as I penetrated her. Even with Sticky Fingers, dry penetration was fun for no one.

Imagine my surprise when I didn't need to.

"No, mmm," Medea moaned again as she braced herself against the countertop with

her arms as I started to gain steam. “I, ahhh, I was going, mmmmmmmm, to wake you up.” She had trouble speaking as I continued the slow withdrawal and powerful slam. It gave me depth, and I could control the angle. “Break-ah-fast in bed.”

“And the Naked Apron?” I asked, pulling out till just the tip of my dick remained within her as I squeezed her nipple, rubbing the engorged nip along the fabric.

The smouldering look Medea threw me over her shoulder and through a curtain of purple hair nearly drove me back in, but I held off for her answer.

“You’d wake up with your cock in my mouth,” Medea answered crudely. My dick twitched. “You’d get breakfast in bed, and so would I.”

Even my self-control has limits.

I slammed forward, and the counter *dented* under the strength the naughty witch needed to exert to keep from crashing into it.

“You got horny,” I grunted.

“Deeper- ah.”

“Cooking.”

“Harder. Harder. Harder.”

“While imagining.”

“Fuck me. Fuck ME!”

“Sucking me off.”

“NNNNNnnggngngng.” Caster fell forward as she used a finger joint to muffle her cries.

I fucked her at a ninety-degree angle, her ass rippling and reddening with my pounding as she desperately tried to cling to the countertop. Her fingers dug into the wood, splintering it with the strength of a Servant.

“While I ate breakfast in bed?”

“YESSSSSSS!” Medea hissed, giving up on silence as her walls undulated, trying to milk me for all I was worth as an orgasm ripped through her.

This wasn’t dirty talk. I was genuinely asking.

I knew Medea had this whole ‘housewife’ fantasy, and we had played with it in bed before, but this went beyond that.

That was some straight-up Stepfordization-level stuff.

Didn’t mean I was going to stop.

I couldn’t. Both because I hadn’t cum, Medea still had a few orgasms in her, and because I literally couldn’t.

There were some Orders I was okay with following.

Ah, forced to fuck my wife in a Naked Apron. Indeed, the Company had screwed me

over.

CRACK!

The counter finally gave up the ghost, and Medea's hand fell away with a fistful of wood.

…. I'd make that joke to her later.

I caught her with the hand kneading her breast, pulling her up against my chest. I never stopped moving my hips, even with the new angle, and her pussy never stopped twitching. By now, our activity had already flooded her thighs and my groin. Our hips met with a wet SPLAT SPLAT SPLAT as I continued to rail her in the kitchen.

The Family didn't really keep a set schedule except for meal times. Nobody needed sleep, and we operated worldwide, so anybody could be up anytime, even in the middle of the night here.

Anybody could walk in at any time.

We didn't care.

I wasn't an exhibitionist, unlike Yoruichi. I just had no shame.

Medea was just horny.

I had gone from sweet love to debauched lust in no time, but I didn't care. All I could think about was her.

The feel of her body against mine, the warmth and tightness of her squeezing pussy, and the image of her in this apron, ready at any second for me to take her. It inflamed my desire, almost making me mute as I lost myself in the moment's pleasure.

If I couldn't talk, I could still put my mouth to good use.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!" Medea *howled* as I bit down on her pointed ear, not enough to draw blood but strong enough to leave a mark.

The ear was a pretty standard erogenous zone, all things considered, but I knew Medea's were especially sensitive. I exploited her weakness mercilessly as I nipped and nibbled, switching ears as I hammered into her, the wet SMACK SMACK SMACK of our hips lost in her cries of pleasure.

Elves are for lewding.

Elves in Naked Aprons? There was no lewder thing in the world, and it undid me.

With a roar of my own, I came.

Ropes and ropes of cum splattered against the walls of her grasping cunt. It tightened, clinging to me to wring even one more drop from me.

I held her there against me as we both shuddered, riding the high of our orgasms together.

"Ah," Medea sighed out a heavy breath, nuzzling against me as I leaned us against the

counter. The apron was pressed between us, and I kneaded her naked ass cheeks as we luxuriated in post-orgasmic bliss. “The food burned.”

“We’re in no rush,” I said, slightly panting myself. “I was going to cook for you anyway. Today is all about you.”

“Mhm? What, exactly, do you have planned?”

“Mmm,” I hummed a little in thought before deciding to go ahead and tell her since it might affect what clothes she wanted to wear. “There’s a fashion show in Milan in a few hours. After that, I’m taking you to a Homo-magi enclave I found. We can explore together, maybe find a few curiosities. Their way of casting magic is completely different from ours. Then lunch at this hole-in-wall restaurant in Rome. I mean that literally, by the way. It’s a restaurant focused on magic cooking that you need to pass through an actual hole in the wall to get to. I figured we’d end the day by raiding the remains of Olympus. I did a number on it, but there should still be artifacts, books, and the like. Plenty of statues to deface. Then back home for dinner and… dessert.”

Her eyes gleamed with relish with every word I spoke, and her smile widened.

By the end, I feared she’d hurt herself with how wide it was.

“That sounds wonderful,” she purred sensually as she nipped at my neck.

“Oh,” I said in fake realization. “On more thing.”

“Hm?” Medea pulled back, eyes perked with interest.

I met those eyes with my own, willing her to understand my seriousness and sincerity as I spoke three words.

“I love you.”

Her eyes widened. Her cheeks flamed red as she buried it against my chest, arms wrapping around me.

“You can’t just say that,” Medea mumbled in embarrassment into my chest.

Her ears, flushed red like her face, bounced up and down in joy as she did a happy little wiggle against me.

So. Damn. Cute.

But Medea wasn’t the type of woman to let me embarrassing her go unpunished.

I felt the change when her arms tightened further against me as she slid lower down my body.

It didn’t take a genius to know what she would do.

With a lewd ‘Slurp,’ she took my dick into her mouth, hollowing out her cheeks to suck our combined fluids from my shaft.

Her eyes twinkled in mischief, ears still red from embarrassment, as she gave one long suck before releasing my cock with a wet ‘plop.’

“I never got my breakfast,” Medea purred as she continued to pump my dick, smacking it wetly against her cheek as she spoke. Her other hand descended under her apron to play with herself as she took my cock back into her mouth.

I moaned, low and guttural, as I gathered her hair in one hand. Long hair was an inconvenience to a sloppy blowjob, but it made a great handhold as she started to bob up and down on my shaft, her tongue dancing along the sensitive tip.

That was the sight Artoria found when she entered the kitchen.

Medea, in a Naked Apron, kneeling at my feet with my dick in her mouth. Her cheeks hollowed out as she tried to suck my soul out through my dick, her hand rubbing her cunt as my cum leaked to the kitchen floor.

“Ah,” the King of Knights gasped at the sight, face flushing red.

“MMMmmm,” Medea moaned at the sound of the blonde’s voice and made to pull away. I held her down, thrusting my dick deeper into her throat till her lips rested against my pelvis.

Artoria was only in the blue leotard that she wore under her armour. It did absolutely nothing to hide her curves. Mile-long legs, ending in thick thighs, were bare, and her breasts looked like they would spill out at any second. Likely, she was returning from doing some ‘hero-ing’ and wanted a late-night snack before bed.

“I will, um,” Artoria stuttered, green eyes wide and her flush covering her entire body. “Give you some privacy.”

She turned hurriedly to leave.

I stopped her.

“No.”

My sole word wasn’t loud, but it was authoritative.

Artoria froze, eyes still wide as she looked back at me.

I gestured to the kneeling witch, frantically sucking my dick like her life depended on it.

It took a second for Artoria to realize what I meant. I saw it when she understood my intention as her mouth fell open and her flush deepened into a dark crimson.

For a moment, I thought she would flee in embarrassment.

Artoria had come a long way from the virginal, pure woman who had first appeared on this Island over a year ago, but she still preferred to keep her romantic affairs private. Most of our times together had been almost vanilla, despite her pornstar body. Unlike many of my other wives, like Glynda, Yoruichi, Medea, Diana, or a few others, she didn’t seem to be as adventurous in bed.

But then I saw her tongue flicker over her lips, her chest begin to heave with desire,

and her eyes lock onto Medea's bare ass.

With hesitant steps, Artoria entered the kitchen until she stood behind the kneeling Caster.

Medea heard her approach, and her efforts to wring out her breakfast redoubled.

If it wasn't for sex magic, I'd be genuinely worried about chaffing with the speed and intensity of her suction.

I watched, a wicked grin on my face, as Artoria lowered herself to her knees behind Medea. Then lower until she lay on her back on the cum stained ground. The busty blonde slid herself under the kneeling woman's legs.

I could see the instant Artoria started to eat Medea out, her hands grasping the witch's ass cheeks as the Knight pulled her cunt onto her mouth.

The Caster's eyes went wide, then rolled up in her skull as her entire body shuddered. She moaned again, loud and long. The vibrations transmitted to me through my dick in her throat. I had to bite back my own moan at the force.

I looked down at her, the whites of her eyes visible as drool ran from her mouth to dribble onto her apron. I could see Artoria's massive breasts heave behind her as the blonde continued to give the Greek a tongue-lashing of a lifetime. The King of Knights had also pulled aside the bottom of her tight leotard to play with her pussy.

My hand, not holding Medea's hair out of her face, reached down and flicked the tip of her ear.

Purple eyes snapped back into focus, staring up at me with enough lust to inflame the sun.

As I came, giving Medea her long-awaited breakfast, I repeated those three words.

"I love you."

I don't know if the orgasm that rocked Medea then was the largest of her life. All I knew was I'd have to work hard to top it.

I was up to the challenge.

After riding out our respective orgasms and watching Medea exchange a cum filled kiss with Artoria, we lay the King of Knights on the counter and had our wicked way with her for hours.

I ended up missing my own breakfast, too caught up in the lustful haze until it was time to clean up and leave, but I was okay with that.

Medea's goofy smile the entire morning, throughout the fashion show and our exploration of the magic town, was reward enough.

It was only as we were finishing lunch that she finally seemed to be in complete control of her faculties.

“Mmm,” Medea hummed in satisfaction as she swallowed the spoonful of gelato I fed her. “Before you distract me again with your wicked wiles.” I raised an eyebrow in amusement as I took my own bite of the desert. “The Amazons found something under the mountains. A room with a carved altar, a brazier, and stone doors.” I froze for half a heartbeat before swallowing the food in my mouth. “They wished to verify it was safe before they opened the doors, and I couldn’t answer.”

“I never brought it up because I didn’t think anyone would find it,” I said casually, feeding her another bite. “How’d they find it anyway? It’s pretty deep down.”

“One of those burrowing worms passed through it and attacked their settlement,” Medea answered with narrowed eyes as if accusing me of deflecting. I wasn’t. “What is it? I thought structures couldn’t appear on the Island unless someone built it.”

“The technical rule of the Catalogue is the Island will naturally shape itself to accommodate ‘biomes’ I encounter,” I explained. “Man-made structures aren’t biomes, even if they are built into or around landscape features. The rules get iffy if I stay in one place long enough to become part of the biome itself, the structure included. And if I do that three times? I guess my soul considers it a ‘natural’ place.”

It took only a moment for Medea to realize what I meant.

“The Kiln of the First Flame,” she said with concern as her hand grasped mine in solidarity.

I shrugged with a tight smile.

“I have no desire to return there and didn’t think anyone would find it, so I never brought it up.” I could see how her eyes were still worried, so I reassured her with a squeeze of my own hand. “There is no First Flame in there. There’s nothing but ruins and ash. If the Amazons want to explore it, they can go ahead. The only thing to worry about is the ash. It’s so deep that it touches the bottom of the Island, and some places aren’t solidified, so they can fall through and hit the Jewel. If you want to continue your Bonefire experiments, you can also do that there.”

Medea opened her mouth as if to say she wouldn’t but closed it with a click at my teasing smile.

“How’d you know,” she murmured with a flush.

“You’re like me,” I chuckled. “When we see something we are curious about, we can’t help but want to run all the tests we can on it to find out how it works. Just because I am not trapped in those worlds doesn’t mean you stopped your experiments.”

“Still,” Medea said, looking dead in my eyes as she held my hand. “I’ll only do it if you are really sure. Otherwise, I’ll seal it up, and nobody will go in.”

“I’m fine,” I responded, willing her to understand my sincerity. “Don’t expect me to

ever step in there, but you all can have at it. The Kiln is my past, not my present and certainly not my future."

It took a moment, but Medea seemed to understand my intention as she nodded and gave me a heartwarming smile.

"Alright," she nodded.

"What are you thinking of doing anyway?" I asked, genuinely curious about what she had planned, and her eyes lit up, as they always did when discussing magic.

I listened to her ramble on about the nature of the boss souls she still had in inventory, Gwyn's included, after my meeting with Death. She hoped to find something on Olympus from Hestia and would try to pull Melina in to help with experiments, to see what a Dragon of Fire and the Phoenix Force could do with a flame that was a literal embodiment of Life, Death, Light and Dark for an entire world.

Medea hadn't been able to recreate the First Flame before, but she had high hopes with its original birth location and all the material on hand.

I chimed in here and there with what I knew of the Dark Souls world lore, the Chaos Flame and Izalith and the like, and my hands-on experience with the Flame throughout the ages. We spent another hour in the restaurant talking about possible avenues of magic research.

I hadn't been lying about trying to put the Kiln behind me. I wanted my future to be a fantasy of love and laughter.

The woman in front of me was a crucial part of that future.

Medea could be a lewd seductress in a Naked Apron, the manipulative Witch of Betrayal, or a cute housewife.

No matter what, this was the woman I loved.

It was a Mad Love, but it was Mine.

And it was real.

Author's Note:

A short but heartwarming lewd, with a hint of story thrown into the mix.

Only a little to say today.

I've recovered well, so thanks for everyone's well wishes. I am working hard on that surprise and finishing the outline for the rest of Rapturous Rhapsody. Next week will be the start of Part 2 of Volume 3. We'll see how Melina is doing, and some of the fallout from certain arcs crystalize.

I'll see you all next week.

Obsession

OBSESSION I

"Follow your most intense obsession mercilessly."
-Frank Kafka

The fire was beautiful.

Only the size of her head, its edges burned a vivid orange, but at its core was a blinding white, so intense to look at, it would render a mortal blind.

Pure.

That's what this fire was.

It was pure.

Untainted.

Not good. Not bad. Just pure.

All Melina could feel was rage when she looked at this flame.

So much madness. So much death. So much pain.

With her new senses, Melina could feel this fire. Feel its past.

Psychometry.

That was the word Medea used—a lesser-known psychic ability. A byproduct of being the Phoenix Host. Melina could see, feel, and experience its past by looking at or touching something. It came in flashes, in uncontrolled waves. And only from items conceptually related to fire.

Maybe a better host for the Phoenix Force would get clearer images or not be so limited.

But Melina was not a host. She was a vessel. A carrier. An aid. She merely held the force of nature until its true host was ready to take it up.

… Until Mikael decided he wanted it, Melina corrected in her mind.

That was the danger of the Phoenix Force.

It didn't speak to her. It was not a devil on her shoulder, whispering temptation or its agenda to her. There was no clear separation between the Phoenix and herself while they were joined. Her thoughts were the Phoenix's, and its thoughts were hers. They bled into each other imperfectly, not like oil and water, but like two different types of paint. Some colours blended, but others were distinct and clearly their own.

It empowered her. Melina had never felt stronger, felt more useful. All these new abilities and senses weren't as overwhelming as the Phoenix had been. She was still learning, practicing and gaining control, but they fit her well.

Too well.

That was the trap.

With power, there was nothing to stop her. Without boundaries, Melina could do as she wished with the world. If she let the Phoenix flare unchecked, her slightest whim could change the very fabric of reality.

Like all its hosts, Melina had the possibility of becoming the Dark Phoenix.

Because the Dark Phoenix was not a separate entity. It was simply a mass of power with a purpose so vast that it didn't care about the little details.

The Dark Phoenix was the psychic entity being influenced by its host and going along for the ride to devastating consequences.

Melina could not allow that.

The Phoenix Force could not allow it either. Not this time.

It never wanted to become the Dark Phoenix. It simply wanted to fulfill its purpose. But to do that, it needed a host. A host held emotion, risking distortion of desire. Yet the Phoenix wanted to feel emotion as well.

A vicious cycle. A catch-22.

Until it could find a perfect host.

It had found one in Jean Grey, Melina now understood. She had been the perfect host. But the Phoenix had already chosen a host that it thought was perfect and, more importantly, wanted.

Even if it was rejected.

Thoughts of Mikael helped center Melina. The Phoenix's obsession with him matched well with Melina's love for him, which was tempered by her decades with him. Melina knew him better than anyone else, and the Phoenix now understood that. It helped give the pair a common ground.

If their goals diverged, if ever Melina really became the Dark Phoenix, Mikael would tear the Phoenix from Melina and leave this reality to burn.

Neither wanted that.

So they worked together to control their impulses, keeping each other in check so their power would not warp the world. Allies of convenience.

Most of the time, the Phoenix did not care enough about what was going on to have its own thoughts on subjects and let Melina take the reins without influence. Mikael had been the sole exception before today.

Then they had entered this accursed place, and their opinions diverged.

Only by focusing on this flame, this fiery soul, could Melina stop herself from burning this place from existence.

It only slightly helped.

Melina could see it in the fire.

Its first discovery within a world of grey crags.

The… man who would claim it and use it to build civilization and become a god. He would bring light to the world. Through war, he brought hope to his people. Under his hand, his family grew and flourished.

Yet even the White God's might was not unending. His soul was but one of four, and they were but tiny sparks from the First Fire.

Fuel was needed to keep the Fire burning, to keep his people safe, and to save his Age.

And so he committed the First Sin.

Purity is not good or bad. It is simply untainted.

For the many, he fed the few to the pyre. To buy a few more years, a few more minutes of light as darkness crept in. He searched desperately for other solutions.

None came.

When even the bones and souls of so many proved too weak to keep the flame burning, he fed himself to the blaze.

A martyr burned on his own pyre.

He bought his kingdom thousands of years ago with his soul and flesh.

He bought his order hundreds of thousands of years of light with the souls and flesh of the hundreds that came after.

But it was not the paradise that came before.

It was a flickering flame, rising and falling. Every time it was rekindled, it slowly died, fading to embers with each new vessel.

Mikael claimed there was no way to know if things would have been better or worse if Gwyn hadn't become the first Lord of Cinder.

Melina found it hard to imagine a world worse than the one she saw in the White Soul.

It had been born in the First Flame and existed till a man came along to finally extinguish its embers.

Melina could see it in Gwyn's soul.

The first mortal to inherit the soul of the King of the Gods. The man who took up a burden that drove a god mad.

The second, one hundred thirty-ninth, and last, Lord of Cinder.

Staring at the Soul of Gwyn, Lord of Cinder, Melina could see the entire Age of Fire.

Yet this was only one aspect of the First Flame.

This was the Soul of Light. It represented order, civilization, and permanence. It was

an aspect of fire Melina could respect, even if she saw what was committed in the name of those beliefs. It drove her to rage, not because she didn't understand but because she did. She had done the same as Gwyn.

It was all visible to her in the flickering flames. Just as the other aspects present were visible in the nearby flames.

Three more souls floated within glass cases nearby. The enchanted glass protected all four from interference and protected the world from their influence, but Melina could feel them.

Two of them, the Soul of Death and the Soul of Life looked the same as Gwyn's. Three small bonfires. Pure white cores that flickered in red-orange flames that radiated heat. Staring at these two was also better than paying attention to her location. These, unlike the Soul of Light, just made her sad.

Melina knew the necessity of death. Knew of the warmth of life. Fire brought both, and she could stare at them without pain but with a deep weariness.

The last soul was also a flame floating in a glass case, but it was black and radiated nothing. It was a viscous, lukewarm lump of gentle humanity.

The Dark Soul.

Melina could not look at it.

It was too deep, too welcoming and threatened to pull both her and the Phoenix into its dark depths.

Still, she would rather fall into that murky pool than pay attention to what her psychometry told her.

This wasn't even the real Kiln. That had been lost with its world.

This was just Mikael's recreation based on his soul, and it was still enough to overcome Melina. Every second threatened tears.

"Are you going to stare at them all day, or are you going to help me," Medea asked from behind the Kindling Maiden. She could not feel what Melina did. All she knew was the joy of learning. "I think I have it this time."

"That is what you said last time," Melina answered, not taking her eyes from Gwyn's soul.

"It was the fans," Medea explained animatedly, always happy to talk about magic and her experiments. "While the Desert Sorceresses of Jugo were pyromancers, their fans and armour are enchanted with illusion magic. A lust spell! It helped lure people in. A pure pyromancy seed should avoid the magical and conceptual pollution problem. According to Mikael, they are passed from master to apprentice, all the way back to Witch of Izalith's own Lord Soul."

“It won’t work.”

“Not with that attitude,” Medea denied. “And even if it doesn’t, I will learn something new, which is a net win. Now, come on. This is the last experiment for the day. Then you can leave.”

Only Melina’s all-consuming wish to leave this forsaken place had her turn from the Lord Souls.

As soon as she was not focusing on the images of light and civilization, she could feel it.

The Fire.

She could feel it in the ash under her feet. She could see it in the melted frame of the giant Kiln. She could smell the long-dead flames in the air.

And she could hear the screams as he burned.

Melina could hear them all, every single one. Men and women. Old and young. Human. Giant. Pygmy. So many races, so many lives. So many souls. Trillions of souls.

And they all burned here.

This fire, for all the pain and suffering it caused, had been hope. The hope of people. Around its warmth, they were safe. With the light it provided, they spread and discovered a world.

Without fire, without light, life could not flourish.

Melina could sympathize with them all. She, too, had burned. She, too, had been consumed by flame to build a world upon her ashes. That was why she could look upon Gwyn’s soul without fear. In it, she saw the sacrifices, but she also saw what it bought.

But here? All she could hear were the screams.

She burned for a minute.

They burned for *years*.

Some did it out of duty, ignorance, or pride. Some did it to prolong their Age nobly, to save those they left behind. Family. Love. Honour. Duty. Some entered the flames willingly with reverent hearts.

They all begged for it to end.

Others had it imposed upon them. Sacrifices to keep the pyre going. Yet, with everybody consumed by the flames, every desperate attempt to keep the dark at bay, the Fire dwindled just a little quicker.

She could trace it all back. From the last moment to the first

Mikael’s smallest of grunts as he extinguished a usurped an ember, transforming it into something new.

The Soul of Cinder throwing body after body upon the tiny flame to give it enough

fuel to last just another day.

Before then, the last Lord of Cinder had burned for months. Before that, years. Decades. Centuries.

And, the first mortal to inherit the flame from the hollow body of a god had burned for millennia.

“Melina!”

“Pardon,” the Kindling Maiden said, snapping her attention from the echoing screams of her Lord. Medea was right before her, with a hint of worry on her face. “What do you need me to do?”

“Is it the Phoenix,” the witch asked worriedly instead of answering. “Is it reacting to the Kiln?”

The Phoenix was quiet. It had been since Melina had entered this place. It never directly talked to her; they were the same person at the moment, but its influence had receded.

Melina took a moment to examine the boundary separating her mind from the Phoenix Force.

Typically, it was hard to tell where one mind ended and the other began. Melina was no psychic, after all. And most often, the Phoenix didn’t care.

Here, it was easy to tell them apart.

Melina, since arriving, had been overcome by pain, rage, sympathy, and a visceral need to find her lover and assure herself that he was okay.

The Phoenix Force was… in awe.

Its power was calm, almost unnaturally so, as it spread around her. It mixed with every particle of ash. It saturated the charred remains of the buildings. It left Melina with every exhale and returned with every inhale.

It looked at the world around Melina with the same senses but saw something completely different.

It, which had seen greater atrocities, more pain, and more extraordinary waves of death, was not consumed by the tragedy of the Kiln.

The Phoenix Force saw the Kiln of the First Flame; it felt the echo of the once great fire, and everything burned within it, and it knew *awe*.

This feeling was new to it. It knew others felt awe when they looked upon the Phoenix Force, but this was the first time the cosmic entity felt it for itself.

The Phoenix Force was almost reverent as it basked in the presence of the only Flame it ever knew that eclipsed it in any way.

The Phoenix Force was Life. Past, present, and future. For this universe and all others

it touched.

The First Flame had been Life, Death, Light, and Dark. Its universe might have been smaller, and it might have been weaker, but it had been more complete.

The Phoenix Force was reverent as it basked in the presence of the only Flame it knew that eclipsed it in scope, if not in power.

No wonder she was so susceptible to the psychic echoes here. The Phoenix was actively pulling it in.

“It is calm,” Melina said, rather than go into depth about what the force of nature was feeling. “What do you wish me to do?”

“The same as last time,” Medea said after giving the other woman a long look. “Just light the Bonfire.”

Melina nodded and crouched beside the circle of stone. All four pillars and their corresponding Lord Souls were placed around. It was only a few feet around, designed more as a ritual circle than an actual fire pit. Within its center was a pile of human bones, and through that pile of ashed bones was pierced a coiled sword.

Calling up the Phoenix Fire, barely a spark upon her finger, Melina set the Bonfire alight.

The tiny flame passed through the bones, sparking fires along their edge. It burned bone as easily as tinder.

Then it hit the coiled sword, and the metal glowed red hot. The heat travelled down its winding length and touched the Pyromancy seed at its base.

The Bonfire exploded.

Fire, bone and ash rained down around them in a loud conflagration.

“Gah,” Medea grunted more in consternation than pain or surprise. She had been protected by a shielding spell and didn’t feel the heat or impact as bone shards bounced away from her.

Melina didn’t even bother, letting the flames wash over her without ruffling her clothes.

“Was that supposed to happen?” Yoruichi asked as she appeared within the Kiln, standing atop the hilt of the still red coiled sword. It hadn’t budged from the explosion.

“No,” Medea sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “It wasn’t. You here for Melina?”

“Yep,” the shinigami said casually as she looked around the area. The remnants of previous experiments still littered the area. “Why are you even doing this?”

“Why am I trying to discover more about one of the fundamental forces of another world? One that fueled the power of an entire pantheon of gods was the power source of civilizations for thousands of years and spawned half a dozen different forms of magic?”

Medea deadpanned. “Take a guess, cat.”

“Hey,” Yoruichi grinned as she hopped down from the sword. “Curiosity is one thing, but you are working pretty hard for a casual experiment.”

“Even ignoring all the other reasons to run these experiments,” Medea grumbled as she started to clean up. “If I can recreate the First Flame, I might be able to replicate its form of immortality without the pesky undead curse. I won’t even need a sacrifice to keep it alight. It didn’t before it started to fade, and Gwyn tried to prolong it. There is no natural order to push against it, no Age of Darkness to follow. We won’t need to worry about power with Mikael. Those who use it won’t need to worry about going hollow.”

“We’re already immortal with Warranty Plan,” Yoruichi pointed out.

“We think we are,” Medea corrected. “And only so long as the Company doesn’t fuck us over again. And Mikael isn’t immortal. He’s nearly impossible to kill, but not completely. I was already experimenting with the material from that world, but I had the idea based on the lie he told during that interview. If we can get an actual source of immortality, one fueled by his unending power, he won’t need to be as cautious anymore. If we die, or his true body is destroyed, we can return at the Bonfire. And we could turn it off if we wanted to pass on. It would solve almost all our issues. If I could just recreate the damn thing.”

Melina blinked in surprise. Was that the reason? All Medea had told her was she needed her help lighting the fires, and it would be good practice for her.

Melina sometimes wished the witch wouldn’t be so vague about what they were doing or why.

The irony was completely lost on her.

“I know how to keep it going,” Medea grumbled as she put away the four Lord Souls. “I just don’t know how it first came to be. I even watched the first scene in the game it was based on, but it’s left so vague as to be unhelpful.”

“Tell me if you discover anything,” Yorucihi said casually. “I, for one, am getting out of here. This place is hell on my spiritual senses. Too many souls.”

“Really,” Medea asked eagerly, pen and paper suddenly in her hand. “Can you see them? Are they recognizable? Are they all Lords of Cinder, or are there others? Is it just humans? Do you see gods? Is Gwyn here? Can you ask him what it was like in the beginning?” The Caster spoke at incredible speeds as if afraid Yoruichi would leave before she got it all out.

“There are no ghosts,” the dark-skinned woman said with fond exasperation as she hopped down from the sword’s hilt. “It’s just a feeling that some places have. When enough power is located in one place long enough, the landscape becomes significant. Like

the Juureichi."

"Fascinating," Medea murmured, scribbling furiously on her notepad. "We had similar places in my world, usually along leylines or places of conceptual significance. You'll have to tell me about it later."

"Maybe," Yoruichi shrugged and looked at Melina. "Are you prepared?"

Melina took a deep breath.

A part of her, the Phoenix part, was reluctant to leave. It wanted to continue to bask in the echoes of flames.

More than that, Melina was nervous, which also carried to the Phoenix.

This would be her first time off the Island since merging with the Phoenix. She'd be around people who didn't have the Defences and couldn't protect their minds. Emma had cautioned it would be disorienting at first, but being thrown into the deep end was the best way to train with Psychic Talent.

Mikael had wanted to push it back, insisting on giving her more time to practice, but Melina refused. She had been on the sidelines for too long already. Even if nothing happened today, which was likely, she wanted to be there in case something did go wrong.

And Melina being there, and clearly the new host of the Phoenix, gave them another source of bait.

They were taking precautions, but it was still nerve-racking. Priscilla must be feeling something similar.

"I'm ready," Melina said lowly.

"Gotcha," Yoruicihi said.

Then she threw Melina over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"What are you doing," Melina deadpanned down at the shorter woman. "I can fly now."

"This is quicker," Yoruichi said with a mischievous smile.

"Then why are we not teleporting? Medea is right there."

"This is also funnier."

Melina didn't have time to protest further, as they disappeared from the Kiln of the First Fame in a burst of speed.

In less time than it took to blink, the pair were outside the Kiln and hovering over the Island. In another blink, they were over the continental US. In less than five seconds from their departure, Yoruichi was hovering over the convention center in New York, Melina still slung over her shoulder.

The sound hit her.

The honking of cars, the clamour of noises, the bustle of a city of millions of people

clustered together. It was loud. It was clamorous. It was distracting.

The life hit her.

There was this myth humans told themselves about destroying natural life when they laid down roads and buildings.

They were wrong. They changed the environment, usually to their own demerit, but life thrived everywhere. Yes, humans destroyed, but they also built. They built up, and they built down.

For every tree cut down, a thousand rats. For every animal that lost its home, a billion little bugs crawled through buildings. For every patch of dirt turned into concrete, a quadrillion tiny fungal spores of mould, rot, and other microorganisms flourished.

Melina sensed it all and ignored it as she did the noise. A backdrop that was acknowledged and forgotten about in day-to-day life.

The Fires hit her harder.

The smell of exhaust from a trillion tiny sparks within engines. The heat of wires thrummed with power as electricity flowed through. Humanity's very existence was tied to fire and its boons, and nowhere was that more apparent than within the confines of one of humanity's greatest cities. There was fire, or the potential for fire, all around, and people forgot about it.

Melina didn't. She couldn't. Unlike Life, her ties to Fire did not let her ignore its presence. It did allow her to control it, so it didn't debilitate her.

Not so the minds. Those could not be controlled or ignored.

A million minds hit her.

'She's hot.' 'I'm late.' 'Not my colour.' 'I need this. I need it.' 'Does this cape make my butt look fat?' 'Oh Elden Lord, Dragon of the Heavens.' 'Yeah, you like that bitch? Suck it. Choke on it.' 'Please no. Stop. It hurts. I don't want to die.' 'I could just… end it. Jump.' 'He's cheating. He has to be. I bet it's Samantha, the skank.' 'MOVE OVER ASSHOLE!' 'Go go Godzilla, yeah. Oh no, there goes Tokyo.' 'Wooo, beat my record.' 'The same thing we do every day. Try and take over the world.' "Melina." 'Three million. Where am I going to get that kind of money?' 'Don't kill her. Don't kill her. Don't kill her. It's just a sandwich. Don't kill her.' 'A left of fourth, then a right on twenty second. Or was that also a left?' 'I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna ask him out.' 'Blood. I need more blood. There has to be more.' 'What do I have to do to feel that again? He's already got twelve. Thirteen isn't much more. It could be me.' "Melina!" 'I'll kill them all.' 'I should have gone with the Captain Marvel costume. I don't have the muscles for this one.' 'Mm, lunch.' 'One times one is one. One times two is two. One times three is three.' 'Where's mommy? Why isn't she here? I want mommy!' 'This is going to be great.' 'I should quit. Become a writer.'

“MELINA!!” ‘Man. If I was a Super, it’d be awesome. I’d get all the girls.’ ‘Help me. Please. Anyone. Please.’ ‘Hmmmhhmmmmhhhhmmmm.’ ‘Heathens. All these heathens.’ ‘Is that the super rare, limited edition, pre-Metropolise Superman card? Score!’ ‘Carry the five, subtract expenses for food and… hmm that can’t be right.’ ‘One two three. One two three. One two three.’ ‘I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.’ ‘So. Damn. Tired.’ His dick isn’t dirty this time.’ ‘Damn, this Sanguine shit is the real deal. I can go all day.’

Silence.

It took a long moment for Melina to realize her eyes were closed, and she was still on Yoruichi’s shoulder.

“Where are we,” Melina asked. She could still sense life below them, but it wasn’t sapient and spread wider. Difused.

“Over the ocean,” Yourichi answered, and there was worry in her voice. “Do you want to go home? I’ll tell Mikael you’re not ready. We don’t have to do this today. Nobody really thinks this is going to work.”

“No,” Melina said, opening her eyes to see the vast expanse of the sea below her. “I didn’t have time to prepare. Let’s try again.”

“I’ll bring you back after a few seconds,” Yoruichi said. “Training is only effective if it is not debilitating.”

Melina simply nodded and closed her eyes again.

She was prepared when the sensations hit her, yet could not do anything more than try and weather the tide of sounds and feelings.

Another failure.

Then another.

And another.

Over and over again, Melina failed. She froze, held fast as her mind was battered into inactivity by a bombardment of psychic noise.

“You know,” the shinigami said casually as they reappeared over the ocean, and Melina caught her breath. “There’s this theory Mikael once asked me about. He asked me if newer recruits to the squads were quicker learners than the older ones. I told him no. They learn at the same rate. Then he asked me if I had trained anyone while in the human world. I hadn’t.”

Melina knew the general gist of Yoruichi’s past. Mikael was good at keeping others’ secrets, but over the years, she had plucked certain stories from him. She had been curious about the women he knew and spoke to sometimes.

Yoruichi was an immortal spirit, a guardian of the dead for centuries. She had been a leader before being framed and cast to the mortal world for a century. Melina thought she

knew what theory Yoruichi was talking about, but that was not her focus.

She was going to do this.

“Again,” Melina said instead of answering.

Still flung over the dark-skinned woman’s shoulder, the pair appeared in the sky above New York.

Melina tried to focus on one thing, staying centred, but the tide of distractions paralyzed her once more.

They reappeared above the ocean again.

“The basic idea is simple,” Yorucihi continued as if Melina wasn’t dealing with the worst headache of her life. “If humans haven’t changed in hundreds of thousands of years, how come the modern man is able to accumulate knowledge so quickly. Previous generations learned math and writing and other subjects, but they spent years on subjects that are taught in months now. Why? They obviously weren’t dumber. I spent three decades learning all I needed to know to become a noble head of the house, and I was a genius. The same amount of time to learn to be a Shinigami. Yet a brat of fifteen learns almost everything in a few years? I never even thought about it, though Kisuke probably did.”

“Again.”

This time, Melina gave up trying to focus on herself. She focused entirely on keeping the voices out. Her defences, even when exposed to the Phoenix, should protect her from foreign influences.

She failed. These were not foreign entities trying to control her or influence her. This was her power, reaching out. She could no more shut it off than she could stop breathing.

… That was a bad example. Melina didn’t actually need to breathe.

“The theory goes like this,” Yoruichi continued to talk. Melina appreciated it. Hearing the other woman talk gave Melina something to focus on, her voice guiding Melina back to her own thoughts. “Past generations aren’t dumber, and new generations aren’t smarter. But new generations are used to handling large volumes of information from the moment they are born. Visual, auditory, and olfactory. The average child in this day and age experiences so much more than the average child only a century ago. While they are young, their brains adapt. By the time they are fully grown, the differences are clear.”

“Again.”

Melina tried to give it all to the Phoenix. She tried to foist all these new sensations on the being that was responsible for these new senses.

She failed again. She was the Phoenix, and the Phoenix was her. What she felt, it felt. Just because there was the slightest distinction in their minds, the thinnest veil separating

them and marking her as an imperfect host, didn't mean they did not share the same senses.

"It's a simple difference in speed," Yoruichi concluded. "They both have the same body. But one trains for sprints, and the other trains for marathons. Neither is better or worse."

"You are saying I am too slow," Melina finally said, opening her eyes to stare at the woman. "My Lord explained this theory to me before. Because my world moved at a slower pace, I learned slower. That is not the case now. I, like you, have Psychic Talent. It should not be this difficult."

"Just as I am sure he explained the reverse," Yoruichi poked Melina in the forehead. "The same people who learn quickly struggle with attention retention. The constant need for stimulation means they have a loss of focus. A sprinter cannot run a marathon."

"I have to do this quickly. We have already missed the opening because of me," Melina insisted.

"We're not late. I told you. You don't have to do anything. You could go back to the Island. You can train with Emma when she becomes available again. We can bait out Odin later. And nobody expects anything but the lightest move from the 'Oppressor.' It's too cautious. You are in no rush." Yoruich, in her own way, was trying to be considerate.

"I refuse." Melina had not stubbornly insisted on coming today only to go home with her tail feathers between her legs. "I chose to become the Phoenix Host. Mikael is trusting to me to handle it. To make it useful. So I will handle it."

"Then stop trying to sprint," Yoruichi sighed, giving up on trying to talk her back. "You learning how to use the power is not the problem. Your method of learning is."

"What do you mean? I am doing as Emma suggested. She's the psychic."

"Exactly. I have Psychic Talent like you. Unlike you, I've had it for a year. Why am I not peeking at everyone's naughty thoughts?"

"Because you can't. You have talent but no ability to exploit the talent."

"That is my point," Yoruichi said. "You are trying to learn to use psychic powers like a psychic. No matter the talent one has that doesn't change the fact that people are different. In Hakuda, it is a difference in size, weight, reach, or spiritual power. All that needs to be taken into account when I train my squad. That theory I just told you about? I didn't care or grasp it until Mikael used the running metaphor. I don't care about neuroplasticity or whatever. I'm not Mayuri. I'm Yoruichi Shihouin, the Flash Goddess. I care about speed. So, instead of learning to use the Phoenix like Emma, learn to use it like Melina. Do not be consumed by other people's shadows."

Melina didn't say anything; she just closed her eyes again.

Yoruichi sighed and brought them back over to the city.

A few seconds later, they were back over the ocean.

Melina slumped against Yoruichi's shoulder.

Another failure to block out the minds around her.

It wasn't that she didn't want to take Yoruichi's advice. She just didn't know how.

Who was Melina? Not the woman who burned pointlessly or the one who didn't know her purpose. Who was she now?

It took ten more tries for her to get the idea.

In the end, Yoruichi had given her the answer.

Of course, the Shinigami cared about speed. She was a Dragon of Speed.

And Melina was a Dragon of Fire.

"Again."

This time, when the sounds, the life, and the minds hit Melina, she did not try to block them out or shunt them to the side.

She fed them to the flames.

That crackling core, that bundle of warmth and power within her.

She took all she received from the world, every overwhelming bit of information, and turned it into coal.

When Melina opened her eyes above New York, all she could hear was the crackling of the fire.

Which was a problem because Yoruichi was trying to talk to her.

It took a few seconds for Melina to release the tight grip she had on her senses to let actual sounds pass.

She didn't need to filter out sound, just her mind's interpretation of psychic waves as sound waves.

"-eaf are you?" Yoruichi asked worriedly. "Because I am not getting my collar if Mikael finds out I broke you."

"I can hear you," Melina said, the whoosh of flames echoing in her mind.

It was… odd. Like she was drowning and was getting lightheaded. Like her mind was working at full speed but wading through mud simultaneously.

The world was approaching her from the other side of a glass wall. She could see it, but they were separate.

"At least you're talking," Yoruichi said as she looked Melina over. "We'll need to work on that later."

"Work on what?"

"Your hair is on fire," the shinigami said, lifting a strand between her fingers. This

wasn't the vague heat haze that followed her everywhere. It looked like Yoruichi was holding a thread of liquid flame. "Not a concern for today since you're going to be bait when we're not hidden, but any time you aren't in spiritual form, it will be really obvious. You'd make a terrible member of my squad."

Melina felt a bit affronted at that. She was great at hiding… most of the time.

"I'm going to bring us closer to the ground," the Shinigami said. "If it becomes overwhelming, let me know, and I'll bring us back."

"I have it now," Melina said. Despite her words, she closed her eyes to focus on the flame within once more as they appeared in an alleyway only a few blocks from the convention center.

The press of minds against hers quintupled. The fire blazed brighter.

Yet she was okay.

"Good job," Yoruichi said, looking genuinely impressed when Melina opened her eyes to give her a nod. "I honestly didn't expect you to get it under control today. Can you read their minds from here?"

"I can't read anyone's minds," Melina said plainly. She was feeding everything to the fire in her mind. "I am not overwhelmed anymore, but I do not have full control."

"Something to work on," Yoruichi hummed as she finally set the Kindling Maiden down beside her. Melina adjusted her clothes and nodded at the other woman. "We're going in now, but I will pull you out again if it becomes too much."

"It won't." It would be a while before Melina could fully control her power, but at least it wouldn't paralyze her anymore.

"We'll see."

They both shifted from the material plane to the spiritual.

It was odd for both of them. They'd done it before, of course. But how it operated in this reality differed from their home worlds.

Both of them could pass through walls or even people, but anything with enough power, magic, or spiritual mass would be able to touch them. Some entities could still see them since they weren't invisible. They were just living on a different layer of reality. Mikael, for example, could see them because of the abilities he received from being patronized by Death.

Most could not. They were undetectable and untouchable to the masses except for the slightest hint of heat haze where Melina passed.

Either way, both women passed from the alley and onto the street.

The river of people was unending and wholly inconsequential to the pair as both women flowed through the crowd like air. Thousands stood in line to enter the Stark

Convention Center, which covered three city blocks. A fortune of money had been paid for this location.

As Melina's spectral form passed through people, her abilities flared. From small murmurs of psychic sound to shouts that demanded attention, their minds became visible to her.

She fed it all to fire, growing the blaze brighter and brighter.

Yorucihi stayed with her, ready to evacuate the pair if something went wrong, but they passed through the entrance without issue.

Then they were in.

It was set up like a convention, for the most part. Stalls, booths, and various attractions hawked wares and superhero-themed products. Hundreds of people flowed by in groups, some in colourful costumes or intricate clothes.

Melina saw three women and one man, all dressed up like Wonder Woman, congregate around a table filled with Greek-themed paraphernalia. An overweight Superman posed for a picture with a female Thor. A group of uncostumed people sat around a table, playing some sort of card game to the cheers and jeers of a gathered crowd.

All around the venue, robots bustled to and fro, cleaning up messes and preventing people from entering locations they weren't supposed to access. They were each painted in Iron Man's distinctive red and gold colours.

"Check it out," Yoruichi grinned as she pointed at one booth.

Melina froze as she caught sight of one woman in a long green cloak. She was shorter than Melina and had painted a fake scar over her left eye. Most egregious, the woman had taken a very… liberal hand at recreating Melina's clothes.

"The costume is well done," Yoruichi teased. "I can tell it's genuine leather.

"It is terrible," Melina denied. "That much skin exposure would not work at all. She is asking to be disembowelled."

"At least she's dressed," Yoruichi chuckled. "Some of these other costumes are only underwear at best. "

Melina blinked in surprise at the shorter woman.

"I did not expect you to be concerned for modesty."

"Modesty," Yoruichi's grin turned salacious. "I was just impressed. I wonder where I can get some of these. They'll drive Mikael wild. Like that one." Yoruichi pointed to a woman on one of the stages. A redhead with well-defined muscles and posing for pictures with a longsword. She was only wearing a chainmail bikini. "That is completely impracticable. I love it."

“That is a real blade,” Melina frowned as she looked over the woman. “It is sharp.”

“Yep,” Yoruichi grinned. “That’s not a costume. That’s Red Sonja. A spirit possessing a human. Her host is a model. She can see us if she tries. I ran into her a few weeks ago. She’s great fun.”

“A spirit?” Melina asked. “Should you not exorcise her?”

“Nah,” Yoruichi shrugged, leading Melina further into the convention. “The spirit and the host get along pretty well, and they work as on-and-off heroes. Without hollows or a need to keep the balance, there is no reason to make a benevolent soul pass on. Now, come on, I want to see something before we meet up with the others, and I might not get the chance later.”

They passed through the central area, filled with booths and stages, and entered one of the side buildings.

Statues lined this hall, large and imposing. This building was much quieter, though no less packed than the others, as people congregated around the base of the statues and looked up at them. It wasn’t silent, but there was an almost holy quiet to the area as people toured the statuary.

To Melina’s left, a giant lizard-like creature was depicted. Humanoid in appearance, its body was a metallic gray that glistened under a fountain of water. It was stretched out, its neck and tail caught in loops of rope that held it taught as a familiar spear pierced its chest.

To her right, a statue of Superman held a fake Tohu by the neck, ready to throw it at Eidolon. In the hero’s hand was a hologram display made to look like a swirling green portal.

Other statues lined the hall, depicting the various forms of the known Endbringers and their killers.

Yoruichi led Melina to a depiction of a massive, fat, snarling form surrounded by holographic grey circles. Half of its round chest was carved out by the claws of a cat-like dragon. The dragon was also lit in holographic light, shaped like crackling black lightning. Like all the other statues, a large plaque was at its base describing Khonsu, its abilities, attack targets, and notable victims, and how it died.

“I look good,” Yoruichi said with pride, hands on her hips as she looked up at the statue of her dragon form. “I had to pose for it, you know? I was worried they wouldn’t get the lightning right.”

“Is this not too,” Melina searched for the right words as she stared at the depiction of Tsunade, in her Female Titan form, throwing punches at Behemoth as a massive spear fell from the sky. “Disrespectful? Inappropriate?”

“Nah,” Yoruichi denied as she circled the statue, then paused, looking up at a spot of her figure where her tail met her body. “Man, I have a great ass. They’re like… trophies. Points of triumph. Yes, they killed a lot of people, but we beat them in the end. We’re still here. And it’s not just these statues. There was a whole contest for art submissions from the public. ‘Rebuilding: Commemorate Heartbreak.’ Those are in another building, as there were too many good ones they wanted to display. We can see it later if we have the time.”

“I do not understand it,” Melina admired. “Memorializing momentous events with statuary is understandable. Celebrating such tragedy is not.”

“They’re not really celebrating,” Yoruichi hedged. “It’s more like a reminder. This is not our world. In this world, apocalypses happen regularly. People die to villains daily. The Endbringers were kind of a representation of that. The monsters that would always come back, no matter what the heroes did. People have had to adapt. They’ve learned to try and find joy where they can. They celebrate the triumphs rather than dwell on the loss. It’s the only way civilization has survived so long.”

Melina held her tongue. She still did not understand this world and its people well. She had Grail Knowledge, which taught her what to know to live in a modern world, but it did not give her insights into societies. For all that Yoruichi was a playful cat, most of the time, the woman was also wise and well-traveled. She had spent the last few months amidst this world’s people while Melina mainly had kept to the Island.

“There is also a memorial hall here,” Yoruichi continued. “A place dedicated to remembering the people who died to the Endbringers and the damages they caused. Everything there, plus these statues, will eventually be moved to a museum dedicated to the subject. They aren’t trying to forget the cost of victory. They simply celebrate their heroes.”

In Melina’s home, the ‘heroes’ had led the Sundering War. A hero was someone who climbed the mountain of corpses to claim the peak.

Often, they went unrewarded and met tragic ends.

The fire in her mind crackled. She remembered the Kiln and the ‘Heroes’ it claimed.

“Let’s go,” Melina said, turning from the statues and making her way outside the hall of statues.

“Do you even know where you are going,” Yoruichi asked with a chuckle as she quickly caught up.

Melina didn’t but felt no need to mention that as they ghosted through the crowd toward another building. This one was larger, and there were several organized lines of people waiting to get in. Signs indicating what they were for.

Finding their destination was easy, even through the throng of people. Melina just had

to find the appropriate sign.

’11 a.m. Live Interviews. Special Guest: Priscilla.’

From there, it was easy to follow the long line of people to the large room with the stage. It was huge, one of two major venues usually reserved for large shows. The type of place reserved for concerts or famous performances.

Frost had spared no expense on getting this set up.

By the time Yoruichi and Melina arrived, over a thousand seats were filled, even as more people trickled in, getting their tickets checked by the robot guards at the door. The stage crew bustled, setting up the production. A desk was wheeled out with a chair behind it. Three couches were also brought onto the stage, facing the crowd and the desk. Massive screens and speakers covered the area so those further away could still see and hear everything.

Melina ignored the activity around her, even as more people walked through her. The flame in her mind rose and fell as people touched her, and she felt their minds.

Her focus, as well as the Phoenix’s, was searching the crowd for their Family.

“There’s Robin,” Yoruichi nodded toward one corner of the room. The section was dimly lit, and the former pirate was almost completely hidden.

Both women flowed through the seats and the people in them as they approached the woman.

They returned to the material realm, dropping into the seats beside her and startling a couple of young men in front of them. The pair started whispering furiously, recognizing both of them. Robin didn’t flinch, eyes closed and head bowed as she greeted them.

“What happened?” She asked.

“A bit of a delay for practice,” Yoruichi shrugged.

“I have it under control,” Melina said, still searching the room. She didn’t want to remain in the physical realm for long. Just showing up once was enough to bait the hook. Her eyes and hair were attracting attention since they glowed with fiery power. “Where are the others?”

“Backstage,” Robin answered. “Priscilla’s nervous. They’re giving her some last-minute encouragement. And dealing with Frost. She is… intense.”

The fire crackled in Melina’s mind again, and her hold on the flame wavered.

That… hadn’t been her. That had been the Phoenix.

“Melina?” Yoruichi asked, and even Robin opened her eyes to look at the Phoenix Host.

“Apologies,” Melina said, taking a deep breath. “The Phoenix didn’t like that. Something to do with Frost. It’s… uneasy about her. Maybe jealous.”

“Hmmm,” Robin hummed in thought.

“Best you stay here for now,” Yoruichi cautioned. “This thing will start soon, and we don’t need an incident.”

Melina wanted to protest. She wanted to be near Mikael right away. She hadn’t seen him in hours, and now he was near that… skank. Asking Melina to stay away now was stupid. They belonged together.

Melina took a deep breath.

That was the Phoenix’s influence. Melina was patient. Melina had waited for a Tarnished she could work with for centuries. She could wait an hour.

“All right,” she said and faded into spiritual form again. The two men before her gasped, and their whispering resumed with renewed vigour.

“Anything of note,” Yoruichi asked Robin lowly, looking around the room.

“Batman’s here,” Robin said simply as she nodded down the aisle.

It took Melina and Yoruichi a long moment to identify who she was talking about.

There, not at the front but near it and on the isle, was the man himself.

With a long black cape, glistening body armour and a bat-shaped cowl, it was a passable costume.

But that was all it was. Passable.

One of the bat ears on the cowl was half torn and showed its threads. The body armour gleamed like metal but bent like plastic when the man moved. His ‘utility belt’ had a prominent logo of a bat but also a small plastic tag displaying a costume shop logo poking out.

Batman was dressed like Batman.

And he wasn’t even the best-dressed Batman.

Melina could see a half dozen other people dressed like the caped crusader in the room, and at least two had a better costume.

Without Robin pointing him out, she never would have noticed.

“Heh,” Yoruichi chuckled. “He’s good. Without powers of his own, I would have missed his spirit ribbon. How’d you tag him?”

“I saw him come in,” Robin explained. “He was careful not to let anyone touch anything but his cloak. And as soon as you showed up, he noticed. He didn’t blink the entire time Melina was here.”

“Going to be a problem?” Yoruichi asked.

“Maybe,” Robin said but nodded in a different direction. “I’m more worried about him.”

“Who’s that?” Yoruichi asked as she looked at the man sitting right by the entrance

everyone was walking through. Melina couldn't get a good look at his costume, but it was black and white with a long cape.

"That's Giovanni Zatara," Robin explained as the doors were finally closed. "A powerful magician. There are a few other heroes around, too. Nobody else from the League, but a few street-level types. I saw a handful of X-men. The entire Teen Titan team is here. You can see their glow sticks."

Yoruichi clicked her tongue in displeasure. More heroes meant more potential foes if things got dangerous. Diana would be happy to check on the local version of her sister, and Glynda would handle the young heroes if they became a problem.

"What's the pool at?" Robin asked casually.

"If the interview ends without a fight, Tsunade gets a date day," Yoruichi answered. "That's the lowest level buy-in. I win if fighting starts but ends without any death. I get a whole day's threesome with her and Mikael. Glynda has odds on the show being completely shut down. She's only betting with Diana. The loser is the other's slave for a day. Scathach is all in for a complete breakdown. If she wins, she gets the first rejection on any fight for a month. If she loses, whoever has the closest prediction can get her to use her Primordial Runes as much as they want for a week."

"Hmmm," Robin hummed as staff calmed the crowd till they quieted. "I'm in."

"What are you putting forward?"

"A spa day."

"Damn," Yoruichi gave a low whistle. Even Melina felt tempted. With her Devil Fruit and Haki, Robin could was only beaten by Mikael when it came to getting someone to relax. And he cheated with Sticky Fingers. "And if you win?"

"I get peaking rights for the month."

By now, the cameras were rolling, and the pair talked in low whispers. A woman came out on stage and addressed the crowd with a friendly energy. Sally… something. Melina didn't care.

"No skin off my back," Yoruichi grinned. Melina was sure some might have issues with their private time with Mikael being… observed by the pirate, but they were the ones betting, not her. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing will happen," Robin said confidently. "A bit of panic initially, but nobody will take the bait. But, and here is the real bet: Frost will say or do something completely unexpected."

"Deal," Yoruichi smirked as she shook hands with the pirate. "You gotta tell the others, though. I have to stay with Spicy-hot here."

"I will," Robin shook with a smirk of her own.

Melina chaffed a bit at needing a babysitter but didn't deny that Yoruichi had been helpful today, so she kept silent.

Instead, she focused on the stage, where the Sally woman was going through some greeting spiel about her show or something.

Melina felt the Phoenix React as Emma Frost was called to the stage to the crowd's cheers. The secret mutant wore a white dress that sparkled in the spotlights. She looked good, and the Phoenix hated her for it.

Frost greeted the host with a friendly, if professional, attitude before sitting on one of the couches. The second one from the desk, not the closest.

The crowd stilled as the next guest showed up.

Completely unshrunk, Priscilla towered over everyone in the room by six feet, at least, as she walked on stage.

Her head almost brushed the ceiling, and her tail swished behind her in nervous energy as she walked. She had forgone her usual outfit of layered furs in place of a tailored silver dress Medea had made that accentuated her figure subtly while also being modest. Her scythe was nowhere to be found.

"Greeting," Priscilla gave a courtly curtsy towards the host and the crowd. "I am Priscilla. It is a pleasure to meet you all."

The crowd exploded.

People cheered, hollered and screamed as the crossbreed rose again, face slightly flush at the reception.

One man held up a white flag with her image and waived it frantically. Melina saw Beast Boy and Winman stand to cheer Priscilla's name, to the embarrassment of their teammates.

The host kindly led her to the first couch. The dragon girl took up the entire seat, and Melina realized it had been placed further back than the others so that, from the angle of the audience and the cameras, everyone could see her and the rest of the stage without issue.

"Finally," the woman said to the crowd once they quieted. It took a few minutes. "Our final guests are a surprise. They are part of Priscilla's band, the drummer and the backup singer, respectively. I urge everyone to remain calm. Nobody is in danger. We have been very thorough in ensuring there is no risk and even received League approval for this."

The crowd murmured to each other, tensions rising despite the hosts' insistence.

Melina, Yoruichi, and Robin all tensed as well. If the 'Oppressor' took the bait, it would be soon. They didn't think it would happen, but better to be ready just in case.

"Please remain seated as we welcome Cyrus Gold and Ciara."

Nobody commented on the quaver in the host's voice.

They were too busy staring at the pair of Spirit Ashes that walked up to the stage.

"Better known as Solomon Grundy and… the Faerie Queen."

The screaming started instantly.

Author's Note:

Mwahaha. I promised costumes, fear, and ghosts. Happy Halloween! Mwahaha.

I won't say much here for fear of getting too excited and spoiling things. I want to remind people that Side Stories, while optional for the main story, do answer a lot of questions you might have. Yes, even the porn ones. If you've been skipping them, you might be confused.

That's all for this chapter. I will see you all next week.

PS: I left a hint for the surprise I will release next weekend in this chapter. Can you find it?

OBSESSION II

"There are two ways to go when you hit that crossroads in your life: There is the bad way, when you sort of give up, and then there is the really hard way, when you fight back. I went the hard way and came out of it okay."
-Matthew Perry

The plan was simple and based on one of the thirty-six strategies. Specifically, it was the first of the Offensive Stratagems.

Stomp the grass to startle the snake.

Do something pointless to provoke a reaction.

It was loosely based on Mikael's original idea to use Franklin Richards as bait. They now actually had a reality warper they could use, Melina. Even if she was nowhere near the peak of control she'd need to be for them to trust her to do anything dramatic.

But the Enemy didn't know that.

More than that, the Phoenix Force was one of two beings they were sure the Enemy was conscious of.

The other was Ciara.

The Fairie Queen was the first level of the bait. She, realistically, was no threat to the Oppressor now that she was an almost harmless ghost without her shard or her connection to the Black. She had also already spilled everything she knew, so knowledge containment was impossible.

So, when the Family had covertly alerted the Justice League that she and Grundy would be part of Priscilla's band, they had been conscious about possible movement from the Enemy but not genuinely concerned.

There was some pushback from the heroes, of course. They were afraid of the former Birdcage inmate and what it meant for Priscilla to have done to her what she had done to others.

But, in the end, there was nothing the League could do to stop them. It hadn't escaped Emma's notice that none of the heroes on that ship had appeared in public since Melina became the Phoenix.

Instead, the heroes had demanded that they be present when the announcement was made public. Because, of course, they would. There would be panic, and nothing attracts nosy heroes like public discord.

That was the second part of the plan.

If the heroes, possibly controlled or observed by this 'oppressor,' discovered Melina,

what would they do?

And if they were in a public place?

They were stomping the grass. Whether the snake moved or not, the Family would learn something.

And the Oppressor had to do *something*.

Emma knew how much the Phoenix Force changed things. It was not a tool you could allow your opponent to control. It was practically a victory condition by itself. Either you controlled the Phoenix, or you removed it from the board.

Even if the heroes were ignorant of Odin, and the Family was still trying to understand what was going on with the whole Asgard situation, there was no way to hide Melina's ascension as the Phoenix host without keeping the woman confined to the Island. So, logically, the heroes would blame the Family for what happened on that spaceship.

But what would they do? When confronted by the Phoenix host and a panicking crowd, will they act as heroes or as agents of the Enemy?

The only hiccup in the plan had been the uncertainty of whether Melina would be able to attend. Emma was genuinely worried for the woman. She had all the psychic subtly of a drunk rhino. There was every possibility Melina would be overcome by her abilities as nascent telepaths often were.

If that happened, Mikael would use an illusion. That was a subpar option, as illusions were not foolproof, but it was there.

Even as screams echoed through the crowd, people rising to their feet to rush for the exits and the security bots to try and keep peace, Emma continued to work.

"Those on the ship are still asleep," she reported to Mikael, who was holding her hand. While touching him, her powers knew no boundaries, and she freely plucked secrets from even the best-defended minds. "Those that weren't don't have anything on us either. They are waiting for the others to wake up for their testimonies. Zatara thinks it will be in a few days. Before seeing Melina, Batman suspected you grabbed the Phoenix, but it was a guess. He wasn't going to confront you till he had proof."

"Should I be flattered he thinks I can steal a cosmic force from below their noses?" Mikael asked sardonically with a chuckle, even as his mind carefully categorized the crowd's movements. One of the parts Emma liked about him. "At least the Sorcerer Supreme won't come after me for pulling an Obito. I was worried he'd be able to see through the illusion."

Emma didn't ask who 'Obito' was, seeing the reference in his mind.

Heroes, always quick to react, had lept to help quell the chaos, and Mikael watched it all without moving.

There was chum in the water, but were there any sharks?

It didn't look like it.

Nobody had thrown a punch yet, too busy trying to flee, but any help the Supers would have been was mitigated by the fact that three 'Supermans' and four 'Wonder Womans' and no less than sixteen (thanks to aggressive advertisement efforts and numerous 'unique' costumes to choose from) 'Iron Mans' were among the crowd trying to flee.

With an idle thought, Emma divested a second to peer into a few minds that had started the panic to check if it had been enemy action.

It hadn't.

One of the guests was a Super that triggered during Ciara's original rampage. They were dressed up as, funnily enough, Priscilla herself in a layered fur dress. They even had painted on scales. Their fake tail had been left in their seat when they screamed and ran.

She had only been the first to scream and run. When one of the herd bolted, the rest followed.

Her curiosity sated, Emma dove back into the minds that mattered.

Batman's was the juiciest. He had so many fingers in so many pies. She had only done a surface-level scan during the Gala, too busy with Luthor and getting a grasp of everyone else there to do a deep scan.

He had Dragon's kill switch, which was… interesting. It meant he had access to all her code, could modify her in the blink of an eye and approaching her in confidence was doomed to failure. Apart from that, there was a smattering of interesting details in his mind. He was a genius, no doubt, and parsing through it all would be a task that would take hours.

Instead, Emma just picked through the most recent and vital details. An uptick in Master class Supers, a new medicine that could grant low-level Superpowers (Emma hadn't been aware Elixre had died in this world. A shame.), the completion of the Watchtower in two weeks, and ongoing concern for his sleeping friends.

All fascinating and possibly valuable, and she reported it all to her husband, but Emma dove towards specific parts of his mind, those centred around Mikael and her Family specifically.

There was the paranoia, but there was a surprising amount of respect there.

It was tied with two memories, one a meeting with two ghostly figures in an alley and the other seeing his long-time friend Alfred look years younger. But that respect, and even trust, was tempered by an almost fatalistic certainty that Mikael would eventually turn into a threat.

Batman wanted to trust her husband, Emma realized. He wanted Mikael to be a hero, to continue to do good in the world and wanted to be proven wrong. And, so long as Mikael continued to do good, Batman would trust him.

Batman was just certain it would not last forever and had to be prepared for that inevitable conflict.

Mikael played by his own rules, Batman had realized. While that was largely altruistic, it wouldn't take long until something came along to change that. The Phoenix Force was the perfect example. The League's plan would have neutralized the Phoenix as a threat for millennia if successful, on top of giving humanity a tool against the likes of Galactus.

Mikael, without alerting anyone, had schemed to gain its power for his own faction. Like with Trigon, no law had technically been broken, and no one was hurt, but his threat grew.

Eventually, Mikael would want something he could not gain without making enemies of heroes. Or, Emma realized this was one of Batman's more prominent fears: some fool of a villain would do something to tickle the sleeping dragon.

Mikael would respond in a decisive and cataclysmic manner.

The Elden Lord had killed the gods because they wanted his sword and tried to blackmail him. He had a Demon Lord and now the Pheonix to back him up, not counting the rest of the Family.

Of slight interest to Emma was that Batman was sure there was a wife the public wasn't aware of. He had seen the footage of Priscilla killing Tohu, as had many people, and the phantom image of the six-winged dragon Emma's Semblance projected.

Most assumed it was her husband behind Heartbreak because of that image and the feelings it brought, but Batman believed the exact opposite. He compared what he knew of the man, his temperament and abilities, and decided it was someone else. An unknown wife operating behind the scenes. The psychic they knew existed but had never been able to confirm as one of the known wives.

When he saw Melina display clear signs of being the Phoenix host, he considered her but ultimately dismissed the possibility. Melina had spent the entire Endbringer attack in the healing tent in Brockton Bay, even during Heartbreak.

The caped crusader hadn't told anyone his theory of a thirteenth wife, not until he had proof, but that he had put together the clues at all was impressive.

And irrelevant.

Whoever this 'Enemy' was, if they were really controlling Supers, they would already know about her existence thanks to talking to her counterpart before they discovered it.

Emma pulled herself from Batman's mind, finding nothing of genuine concern.

Batman was right, of course.

Both about her existence and the inevitable parting of ways the heroes of this world would have to contend with someday. This alliance with her Family would last only as long as both sides benefited. That would be a while yet, as certain members of her Family continued to be heroes at heart themselves, but there would come a day when even they could not deny that operating within the binds this world placed on them was not possible anymore.

When that happened, Emma hoped Mikael would shed his veneer. That he would stop holding himself back.

This all passed through her in the few seconds it took to scan Batman's mind, and she hurriedly moved on to other Supers in the crowd.

The panic was both redoubling and calming down at the same time. Those who hadn't joined the throng rushing to the door, who had remained seated or kept their head, had noticed that the 'villains' had remained on the stage and made no move to get off. But those who did not see this only found themselves penned into the room by the closed doors or the wall of people redoubled their efforts to flee.

The heroes would not allow this panic to last for long, and Emma continued to flit through their minds as they made their move.

Zatarra, who was whispering a mass calming spell, was concerned with his comatose daughter and the complete disconnect from the divine realms of the world.

The Teen Titans were moving to help corral the crowd and keep them from trampling people. Emma peeked into their minds but found nothing of interest but their recovery from the incident with the Sons of Trigon, a few local scuffles with low-level villains, their continued training under Glynda and their issues incorporating their new member.

At least Wonder Woman's sister was keeping herself occupied.

Emma practically flew through other minds, finding only low-level Supers, vague thoughts about her Family, reminiscences on Heartbreak, or other equally inconsequential thoughts.

Nothing, nothing and a whole lot more, nothing.

Hell, the only thoughts of any substantial interest outside of Batman's head were from the X-men. They knew Frost was a mutant and wondered what her play was with this whole shebang. They were also dwelling on the recent 'lock-down' Xavier had put them under, only to let them go not long after without explanation.

But this Enemy? Odin? Anything at all that could be a threat to her husband and his wives?

Emma found absolutely nothing.

It was maddening.

If this Enemy, this 'Oppressor,' existed, they had to have some method of contacting and controlling its victims. And, once those thralls discovered Melina, their first thought should have been to report it. Either psychically or through some other method.

Yet there was nothing here. Just like Emma had discovered nothing in Eidolon's mind, she found nothing here.

And it annoyed her.

Almost as much as seeing her local counterpart stand from her position on her couch, grab a microphone, and speak into it with the authority of a judge.

"Enough."

One word, backed by the power of one of the strongest psychics on this planet, quieted the room.

Any sort of Master power was dangerous and hard to defend against. In the entire audience, only one or two were not affected as Emma Frost glared the room into silence.

Then, both to cover her use of power and to flex, Frost looked Zatara directly in the eyes, nodded, and addressed the crowd.

Emma could begrudgingly respect that small move caught on camera for the world to see. The only part of this farce so far she hadn't planned out with her counterpart. Forst had just accused him of Mastering the crowd and thanked him for it. And he had to sit there and take it.

It wasn't fair to the magician. He had been going for a 'slow return to calm' effect, thanks to the other heroes keeping any injuries from happening, rather than the immediate 'STOP' that Frost pulled. But nobody would know that unless they knew magic and that Frost was a mutant.

Or had Magic Talent and spent over a year living with one of the greatest witches to ever live.

"I have *personally*," Frost stressed the word even as she spoke coldly. Like she was daring anyone to challenge her. "Had my guards ensure the safety of everyone here. There is no threat. Neither the Faerie Queen nor her shade can hurt you."

In the silence that fell, a slightly tremulous voice rose.

"I… I thank the valiant heroes who rose here," Priscilla said softly, the slightest stutter in her voice, also nodding to Zatara in thanks. Whether she knew the trick or not, Emma didn't know.

Priscilla didn't need a microphone to be heard. Throughout the entire minute of chaos, she had remained silent, sitting on the couch and watching things play out. From

their place backstage, Emma could see the way her tail twitched in distress.

"Your efforts to keep peace are well appreciated. My sincerest apologies for all the distress my Spirits have caused. Please. Return to your seats. You are safe under the watchful eyes of your defenders. I have looked forward to meeting you all and do not wish today to be anything but joyful."

Slowly, almost mechanically, the crowd returned to their seats.

Emma remained hard at work.

And she wasn't the only one.

"Northern Europe is clear," a tiny blue doll reported from its place, poking out of Mikael's chest pocket. "China has two more bases than previously discovered. I am assigning more dolls."

"Any response?" Mikael asked, even as he kept his eyes on Priscilla cajoling the crowd.

They had snapped out of their Frost-induced trance and were now making noise again. Nobody was panicking, though more than a few glares were sent Zatara's way after Frost threw him under the bus, but there were definitely voices speaking in low whispers as they tried to parse out whether they were in danger or not.

"None, my Lord," the tiny Ranni reported dutifully.

"Take your time and report anything out of place," Mikael looked down at the small head to pet it with one finger as he spoke. The small doll was expressionless even as it leaned into his touch. Emma was sure Ranni was using magic to keep her large hat on the doll's head. "Be thorough. I'll keep the illusion over your moon for as long as needed. When dealing with cockroaches, you can't allow even one to survive."

He was speaking to them both, and Emma allowed herself to smile as she ripped three more locations from a mind in Peru.

"As you will, Lord Husband."

"Found anything here, Emma?" Mikael asked as he rubbed a thumb along the back of her hand.

"Nothing."

"They didn't take the bait." Mikael sounded as relieved as he did disappointed. "Tell Priscilla she's good to release Ciara to speak. And have Melina join us."

"Done."

A thrill of pleasure shot down Emma's spine as she manipulated an entire world and scanned the crowd, her mind entirely without limits.

As it should be.

Emma Frost had been Chosen to be the link, the one to communicate Mikael's will and

orders to his women. And she was doing that on a scale she had never been able to before.

Empowered by two Command Seals, her mind overlapped the entire globe. Using the millions of Ranni dolls as relay points, also empowered by two Seals, they tore through their enemies without leaving their positions of safety.

Far beneath the ocean waves, the tiniest mile of a great white claw poked out from the Jewel that enclosed Mikael's pocket dimension. Not enough to cause the catastrophic flooding that the entire appendage being released would cause, but it was still enough of a foothold in this dimension for Mikael to unleash his power into this reality.

The illusion was inconceivably powerful. It covered the entire planet, hiding the Chill Moon inlaid with the Elden Ring as its size quintupled in the sky, dominating the whole horizon for anyone who could see through Mikael's magic.

Emma would admit to herself and Mikael, if he asked, that she had never been more turned on.

This was what she wanted.

All of the earth was under their sway. Individual orders weren't possible at these scales, not without a relay point like Ranni's dolls, but broad controls? If Mikael ordered it, Emma could turn every intelligent being on the planet into their playthings.

And it was all turned against their Enemy.

It didn't matter if it didn't take the bait.

By the end of the day, the Hand would cease to exist.

A naked threat.

If the carrot didn't work, then the stick would have to.

******

The fluttering in Priscilla's stomach had nothing to do with fear of an attack and everything to do with being under the bright lights of the stage.

There were so many eyes on her. Thousands in this room. Millions watching from screens all over the world.

They were all watching her.

And it terrified her.

They would see the scales on her skin, marks of her crossbreed heritage.

They would see her body, at once too large to be mortal yet too small to be divine.

They would see her tail twitching in agitation. The furry appendage barely stopped from destroying the couch she sat on.

They would hear her speak and find it pitiful compared to Sir Bard's sublime voice.

They would mock the ‘archaic’ words she spoke with, once one of the few markers of her class, it was now a holdover she hadn’t managed to shake, unlike Lady Melina.

The entire world would look at Priscilla and know her disgrace, the shame of her existence.

Why had she done this?

Why had she thought she could do this?

Had she, from the safety of her home under Sir Bard’s power, had the arrogance to believe she should step beyond her gilded prison?

Had a lowly crossbreed believed she could bring joy to the world when her very existence was a shame?

Could the thirteenth of thirteen wives, the one chosen as an ‘experiment,’ stand up to the example of the inheritor of Lord Gwyn?

Could Priscilla give this grim world even a fraction of the joy she received?

Could her music be anything but the barest candle compared to the flame that Mikael had kindled in her breast so long ago?

No, the eyes seemed to say. No, you can’t. You can’t, and you won’t. Disappear. Turn invisible and leave. Like you always have. Go unseen and unremembered.

Even as the crowd quieted, it was all Priscilla could do to stop herself from shaking.

The words of her Family, the encouragement they had given before she came upon this stage, had been enough for her to play her part in quelling the panic, but they fled her as the host retook control of the situation, and all attention was on her once more.

“So,” Sally Floyd started with a forced chuckle. “Miss Frost, Miss Priscilla.” There was a noticeable delay as she addressed the last two figures on the stage. “Miss Ciara and Mr Gold. I admit this is a first for me. I honestly do not know where to start.”

Perhaps sensing her mistress’ state, the Faerie Queen did not hesitate to answer.

“Why do you not start by calling me Ciara, Sally,” the Spirit Ash said with a charming smile and a laugh that tinkled like fairy bells. Grundy rumbled something that might have been words. Or a laugh. Or a cough. “I am no longer the illustrious Queen of a Court. Bereft of all my companions but my champion, I have become but a humble performer upon a stage at my liege’s leisure.”

There was another brief moment of hesitation as the hostess looked from the spirit to Priscilla to Frost before she jumped on the chance provided, her history of investigative reporting shining through.

“How did this happen,” Sally asked, leaning forward. “I am sure I am not the only one curious how you two went from one of the first Birdcage escapists to suddenly being here and so… different. The League reported you, Swamp Thing, and Gavel had been detained.

How did you come to be like… this?"

It was evident that, despite reassurances of her safety, the hostess was cautious with the former Super boogeyman.

"Alas," Ciara feigned embarrassment as she giggled behind a hand. "The tale is one of great embarrassment. Of my hubris and the price I paid for it."

"I am curious as well," Frost said with a slight smile as she looked at the shade. Unlike Sally, she was completely relaxed, like everything was under her control. In her, Priscilla saw the poise she wished she had. "When I contacted Priscilla to be Frost Records' first artist, I had no idea her band would be so… eclectic."

Mikael or Emma may appreciate the subtleties of the words, how Frost was giving permission for Sally to interview Ciara without explicitly saying it. How the mutant was using this opportunity to put her company name out there as the one in charge and the Family answering to them in some small way. A tiny power play that was harmless, as everyone knowing the actual deal would know, yet very real to the outside world.

Priscilla didn't care about any of that as her Spirit Ash bought her time.

"I journeyed to Lord Albion's land," Ciara began to weave her tale. "An invasion. There, my army grew as I gathered other invaders under my banner. Fantasma, Wang Fang, Shion, El Seignor, and others fell joined me in my march."

There was a casualness as the Faerie Queen listed a few victims. Well-known victims. Well-known state-sponsored victims. Supers that had no reason to be on the Island.

"Lord Albion let me deal with the chaff. He cares not for invaders, you see. Be they good or bad. He lets them come, and the Island does the rest. My Lady, though, is merciful. She desired to give my companions rest, and when I took umbrage and refused her kind offers, she was forced to confront me."

"So she killed you," Sally asked, shooting Priscilla a look that the dragon girl didn't notice.

All the crossbreed felt was nausea.

This was too much. Too many people. Too many eyes.

When they weren't visible, when they were just an endless flow of fake names passing on a screen in a second, it was one thing. Priscilla had been home, completely safe on the Island.

Here, she was visible. Vulnerable.

Not to the Enemy or Odin or a villain. Priscilla didn't fear anything like that. She might be the least of the thirteen wives, but she was still Mikael's wife. She was still a dragon. She was not weak.

But she was not strong either.

Not in the way her Bard was.

She could not discard her shame under a million eyes.

“No,” Ciara giggled again. “She sought to free the companions of my power. I died to the Island. A victim of one of the beasts Lord Albion warned about. I was too foolish to heed his warning.”

“There’s a monster on that island that can kill you,” Sally hissed as the crowd started to chatter and make noise at the frightening news.

“Indeed, though I pride myself in that it was the most deadly of such creatures that slew me. A monster of endless hunger that lurked in the most unexpected place, responsible for the death of more Supers than even I. I let down my guard and paid the price.”

‘Priscilla?’

‘Sir Bard?’ Priscilla asked in her head as Mikael’s voice echoed telepathically.

‘Emma’s patching me through. What’s wrong?’

‘I cannot do this,’ She admitted shamefully.

‘Ok?’ Mikael’s voice was genuinely confused, and Priscilla’s shame redoubled. Of course, he would not have such a weakness. He could not comprehend such a folly as hers. ‘Why not?’

A simple question, one with such an obvious answer that Priscilla wondered why the typically insightful man even asked.

‘Because I will fail,’ the dragon girl half wailed in her mind. ‘I am not like the others. They are all looking at me, and I… I can’t do it.’

‘So?’

‘Sir Bard! My failure will shame myself and the Family.’

‘Pfft.’ Priscilla didn’t know how he did it, but Mikael somehow managed to snort a laugh in her mind. ‘Babe, what makes you think I have any sense of shame. Half the shit that comes out of my mouth should get me arrested for how bad it is. And the rest of the Family don’t care about that.’

‘But I am not like them,’ Priscilla insisted. ‘I cannot ignore such shame. I am not like thee either. My music, my voice, my unsightly form… I should never have left the Island. I do not know what to do.’

Mikael laughed.

“How did your… death lead to becoming part of the band?” Sally leaned forward, her fear slowly fading in favour of curiosity. “Did the Elden Lord bring you back?”

“I am not truly alive,” Ciara laughed lightly. “I am but a remnant. And no, Lord Albion is not responsible for our state. T’was my Lady. She has a connection with the dead.

A pacifying spirit. The wails of my comrades in arms brought her attention to me, for I did not know that my power caused them pain. After my fall, Lady Priscilla allowed them all to pass on to the great beyond if they wished. If they didn't, she offered them a place at her side. She does not force us to work, fight, or any such nonsense before you ask. Once I heard of her desire to perform, I volunteered to aid her in her dream."

'Sir Bard! T'is not a situation for laughter. I am in crisis.'

'My silly, floofy dragon,' Mikael said, even as he laughed. 'I'm not laughing at you. Just at the irony. You do know that before the catalogue, I absolutely sucked at singing, right? Like the worst. It sounded like a bag of wet cats being thrown against a wall.'

'…Truly?' Priscilla hadn't known that. In fact, she didn't think any of the others knew that either. For as long as they knew the man, his love of, and skill with, music had been a core part of him.

'Yep,' Mikael said as he got his chuckles under control. 'That's one of the reasons I chose Siren Song and Performance Talent. I love music, but I sucked with it. I'd sing for hours and miss every single note. But this isn't about me. This is about you and your stage fright.'

'A solution?' Priscilla asked. 'Will I be replaced by one of thine illusions?'

'Nope. There is no reason to. For one, you also have Performance Talent and trained with me. So, while you don't have Siren Song, you have the closest this world can get without it. I am going to throw away your argument about your music and voice. I am also going to ignore your 'unsightly form' comment. We both know that all your fans love how you look, and that was before they saw you in that dress.'

'Lady Medea's work,' Priscilla said with the barest hint of pride.

'Your fears are unreasonable, you silly floof,' Mikael said, though not unkindly. 'But that's fine. Unreasonable fears are still fears. I have plenty of those. We just need to deal with it. I will give you the trick I used in your situation.'

'T'is not to imagine them in their undergarments,' Priscilla asked fearfully. 'Lady Yoruichi recommended such, and I do not wish to be so l..lewd.'

'Nah, that never helped me either. Depending on the audience, it either made me horny or nauseous. And since most of my public speaking was in a business environment, it was usually the latter. No, my trick is pretty simple, but it helped a hardcore introvert like me become who I am.'

'What is it?' Priscilla asked eagerly.

'Whenever you feel fear of something, especially something you know is irrational, simply count to yourself. 'One. Two. Fuck it.' Then you dive in, not giving it more thought and faking it as best you can.'

‘…Such a thing works?’ Priscilla asked doubtfully. ‘And must it be so crass?’

‘Most fear comes from ignorance or fear of the unknown. The fear of ‘what if.’ Knowledge is the Enemy of fear, and knowledge is accumulated from experience. By forcing yourself forward, stopping yourself from psyching yourself out and diving right in, you accumulate experience instead of getting caught in fantasies. You’ll still feel anxious; you always will, but it won’t hold you back. And, over time, as you repeat the same task over and over, your familiarity will diminish the anxiety.’

‘…Can I not simply leave under an illusion?’

“I think I speak for everyone when I say we will all sleep a little easier tonight, knowing that your focus has turned to music,” Sally Floyd said lightly, dragging some laughter from the crowd. The ten or so minutes she had spent talking to the former villainess had done wonders to give them time to calm down. “But your surprise visit has distracted me from the main focus of the night.”

The show host, possibly also sensing Priscilla’s hesitancy, had spent considerable time getting as much as she could from the Spirit Ash, but she could only delay the main show for so long. Sally faced the crowd, giving the crossbreed a few more seconds to gather herself.

“She’s been kind enough to keep quiet while we get our questions answered, but we all know what she sounds like. The one who killed Tohu. The dragon princess in the tower. Consort to the Elden Lord. Streamer, singer, and the reason we are all here: Priscilla!”

The crowd went wild, hooting and hollering, stamping their feet or waving flags. Beast Boy was waving around a shirt with Priscilla’s face on it.

‘If you really want to, I will help you leave,’ Mikael said gently, in contrast to the noise that shook the room. ‘I promised to support you all. But I think you’d regret it. You were so excited to do this. To meet your fans. To sing. We can always try again, but giving up now will hurt you.’

‘…Will thee sing for me again? Whilst I do this?’

‘Sure. Any preference? Something to get your adrenaline going? That always helped me with my fear.’

‘The lullaby. The first song thee gifted me.’ When Mikael didn’t answer for a second, Priscilla remembered it had been millions of years for him, and he might not remember which she spoke of. ’T’was the one-'

‘I have it,’ Mikael interrupted her gently. ‘I don’t know too many lullabies, so it was easy to remember. I was just slightly surprised and had to leave Emma to direct things while I did this. Your cue is coming up.’

‘Are thou certain I can-’

‘I am.’ There was a certainty in his voice that welled Priscilla’s chest with pride and sent her tail wagging slightly. ‘You can do this. You will do this. I’ll be here the entire time.’

‘My thanks.’

Mikael didn’t answer, his voice ringing melodiously in her mind as his soothing words calmed her heart.

‘Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
The night is falling
You have come to journey’s end
Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came before
They are calling
From across the distant shore.’

The familiar music, her favourite song, calmed Priscilla’s heart. She took a deep breath, stilling her tail as she looked out at that crowd that was only now starting to calm down.

A crowd that had come for her.

Their eyes still scared her, and she might still fail and shame her Family, but she wasn’t alone.

This was not the Painted World of Ariamis.

This was her Family’s world. Her world.

“Before anything else,” Sally finally addressed the crossbreed once relative silence had fallen. “I wanted to thank you. Personally. When Tohu appeared above New York, I thought that was it. I was going to die. Thank you for killing the last Endbringer.”

‘One. Two. Fuck it.’

“Thy thanks are appreciated but unnecessary,” Priscilla answered gently, and even she was surprised by the lack of stutter. “My Family and thy defenders did most of the work. I simply dealt the final blow. Many others could have done the same.”

“While I very much doubt that,” Sally chuckled good-naturedly, as did a few crowd members. “You don’t need me to flatter you. We’re not here for that. Instead, we are here to get to know you. Priscilla. Why don’t you tell us about yourself? Help us get to know the woman behind the screen, so to speak.”

“What dost thou wish to know?”

“Too much to fit in the time we have,” Sally joked, getting a few more chuckles from the crowd. “Why don’t we start with something simple? Is this your first time in the Big Apple?”

“Apple?” Priscilla tilted her head, and there was more laughter from the crowd.

“Well, I guess that answers the question. ‘Big Apple’ is a nickname for New York,” Sally explained kindly to the confused crossbreed. “It is a nickname meaning the biggest and best city.”

“How quaint,” Priscilla said lightly, smiling at the crowd. “Yes, this is my first time in the ‘Big Apple.’ It is the first city I have visited on this planet.

The crowd cheered loudly, which redoubled again when the hostess asked them to give Priscilla a ‘big, New York welcome.’

Priscilla took the moment to get lost in the music again.

“I hope we haven’t disappointed,” Sally asked once calm had returned to the room. “I would hate for your first Earth City experience to be a bad one.”

“Oh no, it is quite impressive. That mortals could build something so large and expansive without the aid of the gods would have been inconceivable in my world.”

“Why don’t you tell us more about your world then? What was it like?”

This was a topic Priscilla could answer relatively easily, and for a time, she lost herself in talking about what she had seen as a young girl.

She spoke of the majesty of Anor Londo, the halls she once stalked invisible, the intricacies of the court and the radiance of the Age of Fire. The gods, the magic, and the wonder a young Priscilla had felt when she beheld it all before she was cloistered away in the painting.

“It sounds wonderful,” Sally sighed. “A real fairy tale. But the Elden Lord told a different story. One where the world was ending. Would you be willing to elaborate on that?”

“I am afraid I cannot,” Priscilla shook her head, and, at the disappointed look of the woman, she elaborated. “By the time the fires had truly faded, and the Dark Sign branded the undead, I had been confined to the Painted World. All I knew of the outside world came from the few others that joined me in my confinement. Before they went hollow, at least.”

“That must have been hard,” Sally said sympathetically. “How long were you trapped?”

“Centuries at least. Possibly millennia. I know not the exact amount. But I could have left, so it was a prison of my choosing, of a fashion.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“The Painted World was peaceful,” Priscilla smiled slightly at the memory. “While the hollows and other beasts trapped within were hostile to others, they never treated me poorly. It was beautiful, too. I never tired of the ever-falling snow. I would sit and watch it for days or weeks. It was a prison, yes, but it was also a refuge from the world’s conflict.”

“Then the Elden Lord showed up? Swept you off your feet and took you away in a whirlwind romance?” Sally asked, waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“Miss Floyd!” Priscilla gasped, scandalized as her face flushed. The crowd and the hostess laughed. “Nothing so crass.”

“Sorry.” Despite the apology, the hostess looked utterly unrepentant. “But how can that count as crass? I’ve seen you talk smack on your streams.”

“T’is different,” Priscilla explained quickly, starting to feel a bit more comfortable now that she wasn’t being booed off the stage. “Propriety is important, but so is communication. T’is simply the language of the competition. If some fool wishes to spam cheap moves, I will ‘lay a bitch out,’ as they say.”

The crowd howled in amusement even as Ciara covered her face with a hand and Frost pursed her lips in displeasure.

Even Mikael’s singing in her mind was momentarily paused as he giggled to himself.

Any hope of a quick return to quiet was undone when Grundy, with the slow, ponderous movements he was known for, extended a hand and gave the crossbreed an enormous thumbs up.

Everyone went wild.

It took minutes before the hostess managed to get enough control over the crowd again for the interview to continue.

“I’ve caught a few of your shows,” Sally eventually said once peace had been restored. “I am not a big fan of video games, I’ll admit. But your music? I could listen to you sing for hours.”

“My thanks,” Priscilla murmured shyly, a bit of embarrassment coming back at the compliment even as her tail started to trace circles on the back of the couch. “I am pleased that so many enjoy my performance, lacking as it may be.”

“I can call your music a lot of things, but certainly not lacking.” The crowd cheered the hostess’ words, and she continued. “You have a beautiful voice. Why do you think it is lacking?”

“Compared to Sir Bard,” Priscilla shook her head without saying more.

‘A reminder that I am cheating,’ Mikael chimed in her mind as he finished a song and started another. A folk ballad she had yet to hear. He always knew her tastes.

“I don’t know about that,” Sally sing songed. “In fact, don’t we have a few clips of you two together?”

In response, one of the giant screens behind the stage lit up with a short clip of one of her streams. Mikael had joined her for a few minutes and, after speaking to the chat, had sang a duet with her as they played together.

They only played thirty seconds of the song, but Priscilla closed her eyes to listen to it with a smile as the voice in her head paused.

‘So they give and they take
’Til their silly hearts break
Looking down from above
I’m intrigued by their love
So let’s call
Let’s call!’

As the song ended, the crowd erupted in cheers once more, and Sally looked back at Priscilla.

“I don’t know about you, but neither of those voices sounded ‘lacking’ to me.”

“Singing with Sir Bard remains my favourite pastime,” Priscilla allowed with a tilt of her head. “He brings out the best in me.”

“Don’t tell the rest of your Familly,” Sally leaned forward as if to whisper a secret. “You two are my favourites. I would love to see you sing together. But,” she leaned back again. “He, unlike you, does not wish to perform live?”

“T’is so,” Priscilla nodded. “While my Lord has no issue with the crowd, and anyone is free to listen when he does choose to sing, he sings for himself. I am lucky to be one of the few he sings with.”

“Why did you decide you wanted to start a music career?” Sally Floyd asked. “I can’t imagine our modern pop stars or celebrities are what you are used to.”

“Indeed, they are not,” Priscilla agreed easily. “But the form did not matter to me. T’was just mine selfish wish to impart a small measure of the joy music has brought to my life to the rest of the world. I have been fortunate to have the aid of my Family and Miss Frost in this endeavour.”

“That is beautiful. And you, Ms. Frost,” Sally asked, turning towards the mutant. “What made you sign up Priscilla so quickly?”

“It is simply a good move,” Frost answered with a slight smile that was as lovely as it was dangerous. “She is incredibly skilled, as you mentioned, and if Frost Records wishes to

establish itself in the crowded industry, it must rely on the talent of our artists to carry us. Getting her off the ground quickly was the least of the support we could provide."

For as kind as Sally Floyd had been with Priscilla, she did not give the CEO the same cutesy and pressed. She was too used to dealing with the rich and powerful trying to spin stuff in their favor.

"It was quite a gamble. It's only been a few months since the Elden Lord's arrival, less than that since Priscilla has started streaming. To get everything set up, you would have had to invest heavily. Why the quick turnaround? Why the hurry?"

"It was not only good business, which is all about seizing opportunities before the competition. It also suited my goals."

"Which are?" Sally Floyd continued to press.

Priscilla was taking a moment to recompose herself so she wasn't watching as Emma Frost said the words that set the internet on fire.

"To be the Elden Lord's thirteenth consort, of course."

******

It was too slow.

Too slow too slow too slow too slow.

With an idle hand, Nathaniel Essex reached up to scratch between his eyes. He was careful to use the appendage without blood on it as he hated the feeling of the crimson liquid running down his back.

The other hand was occupied holding down the struggling form of Riptide, the mutant struggling fiercely in Mister Sinister's grip.

All Essex could feel was a disappointment as he looked at his Marauder.

He was a failure, regressing into bestial instincts rather than evolving and becoming greater.

Too many of his pawns were like that, failing to maintain control in the wake of the Blood's power.

But why? What differentiated the successes from the failures?

And why was it taking so damn long!

He had been spreading the Blood around the world for weeks now. Disguised as Sanguine but also in every source of drinking water he could get his hands on, and nothing was happening.

The Blood diluted into the water taking longer than the direct injections was expected. Still, those who took the medicine were not showing any reactions he was

expecting except healing and a slight increase in baseline abilities.

So what was the difference?

The itch between his fourth brow satisfied, Essex slit Riptide's neck with a swipe of his claw, the warm spray of arterial blood calming him slightly.

He needed to think logically.

What was different within his lab, the Cadmus lab, and the public?

It wasn't the subject matter. His marauders had started undergoing transformation at the same rate as the Cadmus scientists, though the percentage that fell to beast-hood was lower due to his careful selection of pawns.

It wasn't a difference between homo superior and homo sapiens.

With an idle flick, his claw tore open the Marauder's chest and dislodged the liver. It was undamaged, of course. Essex was a scientist, first and foremost. He didn't damage specimens.

Or food.

Even as he ate, the mutant geneticist continued to ponder the problem, enjoying how the blood covered him. So long as it didn't get his back, its warmth helped him think more clearly.

What affected the speed of transformation? Whether it was to beast or kin, something had to be the trigger. But what?

It was as he tossed Riptide to the twenty or so Maneater boars that Essex had a hypothesis.

"External Blood based stimuli?" He murmured to himself as he picked a scrap of liver from in between his fangs.

It made sense. Sinister had been dosing the Cadmus scientists for over a week, but they only started transforming when he let loose a Maneater boar in the midst. Only once they began fighting and fleeing for their lives did they start to turn into beasts.

Did the Blood need to be incubated in another host first? Did it trigger a reaction when it came into contact with the Blood in the subject's body if the Blood came from another subject?

When had his first Maurader transformed?

Essex didn't even note how weird it was to ask himself that question, as he was usually incredibly detailed and thorough with his experiments.

It had been Arclight, hadn't it?

She had been training with Scrambler when she tore an arm off. It was one of a dozen clones, so Sinister hadn't given it much thought until Arclight had started tearing into the other mutant with a ferocity that was uncharacteristic. She had grown three more arms

and an extra eye in the following hour.

It was a eureka moment for the mutant supremacist.

Of course!

Evolution required conflict. It required the elimination of the unsuitable. It needed Blood to be spilled.

Despite his Eyes, Essex had been blind. No more!

But, if his goal was to ascend humanity past its weakness to evolve, how would he ensure the most lavish spread of bloodshed?

He needed a war. A bloody one.

But how to start one without those pesky heroes flying in to stop it? They were busy in the wake of Heartbreak, but they would still stop anything before it grew to the scale Essex needed for humanity's ascension.

… Unless the Supers were the ones to start the war.

The thought was insidious, but it pleased him.

And he had a pawn perfectly placed to do just that. One he had discarded after the death of Jean Grey and the failure of his plans to merge it with the Summers bloodline.

Yes, the plan was coming together nicely.

There wasn't a hero in the world who would not rise to the challenge of rescuing a newborn infant.

And if he played it right, Essex would gain the Phoenix Force under his control.

If he failed, his failure could be turned into a success. He just needed a catalyst. Fear and panic would do the rest.

Humanity would evolve.

Within his lab, Nathaniel Essex let out a rumbling growl of pleasure as he contemplated a vision of the future as clear as day to his Eyes. It was the closest thing to a laugh he could manage now.

He never once asked himself how he knew who was the current host of the Phoenix Force.

Author's Note:

Hmm, what to say this time?

First off, I am glad I am getting the chance to write Priscilla. She has largely been in the background so far, since her chapter in volume 1 at least. I can't imagine she can go from 'crossbreed outcast' to 'superstar' overnight. But she does have Performance Talent, which covers acting and all performance types, not just singing and dancing. I tried to get a good balance in.

I also had a bit of trouble with the crowd. Getting into the mindset of a regular civilian in a Super world is always tricky. You need to be aware of Super threats, of course, but you also probably have a blind spot when it comes to trusting authority figures in costume. I tried to strike a balance where people are wary, but this is nowhere near the first 'heel turn' a villain has.

Finally, I am trying to be more transparent with the antagonist's movement. They've always been there, of course, and I've been keeping their actions in mind, but now that you, the audience, are aware of them, I want to show that they aren't passive. They're taking action, just as they always have.

I always thought a good story need a back-and-forth between antagonists and protagonists. One side does this, and the other reacts. Actions and consequences.

Anyway, those are just my thoughts. I'll see you all tomorrow.

OBSESSION III

"Obsession is the wellspring of genius and madness."
-Michel de Montaigne

"Listen, toots," Lobo slurred, spilling his drink all over the bar counter even as he eye-fucked her. "You don't fuck with the Sleeper. You don't talk about the Sleeper. And if you can avoid it, you don't even THINK about the Sleeper."

Carol Danvers wanted to punch the last Czarnian, the absolute sleaze ball, but he was one of the only leads she had on the Elden Lord.

"Is that what you call him? The Sleeper? Why?"

"Did you not hear me babe?" Lobo barked out a laugh. "Look around you, girly."

Captain Marvel did and noticed how empty the hole in the wall had become. The last group, four aliens who had been slurring a drinking song when she walked in, were being herded out by one of their members. The Amebid, Elan and Glx were confused and trying to fight back, but their Lupak friend was not having it forced them out the door.

Carol didn't miss the fearful look he shot their way.

They weren't looking at one of the most infamous mercenaries in the known universe but towards her.

Even the bartender had left, leaving her in the dive with Lobo alone.

The Main Man took the opportunity to lean over the bar, snag a few bottles, and start downing them.

"I am getting sick of getting shut down," Carol growled. "Dozens of planets, hundreds of people, and more races than I can name. I've talked with governments, religions, and even a void archeologist." Lobo barked out a laugh, purple booze spilling from his mouth as he did. "The Lanterns don't know anything. The Shi'ar refused to speak with me. And the Thanagarians chased me out! Why won't anybody give me anything!"

"The first rule of the Sleeper," Lobo singsonged as he put down a half-empty bottle. "Is you don't talk about the Sleeper."

"I don't need some Fight Club bullshit," Carol shattered the bar with a fist. "I've been out here for months! And you're the only one who's given me anything. We have a deal. So talk, or I'll take those bottles and shove them down your throat!"

Lobo laughed.

"I thought all of Blue Boy's team were pussies like him," the alien laughed as he took another swig. "Hey, you doing anything later? I'll give you a wild ride."

This time, Carol couldn't hold back.

When Lobo regrew his deformed torso, he resumed drinking like the hole in the bar was just part of the decoration.

He was still laughing.

"You sure you don't wanna fuck?" He asked as he leered at the blonde. "Hate fucks are the best."

"Either you give me something, or I'm gone," Carole said, her frustration slightly abated.

"Since you got me some top-shelf shit," the Main Man said as he took down a very expensive-looking bottle of alcohol, smashing the cybernetic security to do it. "And you will be the one to foot the bill and the blame for this mess. I can give you something. For old times' sake. How is Mr Boring anyway?"

"Superman is doing fine," Carol moved past the topic. The League had a deep intergalactic funding pool thanks to donations from the Fantastic Four. Reed Richards was a household name in the wider universe. Both for heroic deeds and many inventions that had spread, making the first family a lot of money they couldn't use on Earth. "But the Elden Lord, the Sleeper, why do you call him that? And why won't anyone talk to me?"

"I've never heard of the 'Elden Lord' or whatever, but a white dragon the size of a small moon? With six wings and carrying around a jewel? That's the Sleeper. Tas Cali. Mnkl!F. He Who Waits. Beast of the Void. The Seed. White Death. And a whole bunch of other pretentious names in a hundred different languages. The Sleeper is a catch-all term. It's all it does. It sleeps, and it grows. Endlessly. Some idiots think it will keep growing until it is so large there will be no more room left in the universe."

"If he is so well known," Carol said slowly, breathing out of her nose to keep her calm. "Why will no one talk to me about it?"

"Because they're wimps," Lobo snorted, and he faked a whine in a mocking, high-pitched voice. "'Noooo, don't drive me crazy! Don't turn my race into beasts! I don't want a genocide! Why is my daughter eating my eyes with sauce? Curse you, Sleeper!'" After shaking his hand fruitlessly at the ceiling, the Main Man dissolved into laughter.

Carol wrinkled her nose in disgust but stayed. She suspected Lobo might not be the most unbiased source, but he was the only one willing to talk to her, so she'd take what she could get.

"Wimps," Lobo chuckled as he continued to drink.

"So they're scared," Captain Marvel summarized simply. "Why? You said all he does is sleep."

"Because the Sleeper is '*kind*.'" The way Lobo snorted at the last word told Carol that

it was anything but the kindness she was familiar with. “As far as I know, the big bastard hasn’t killed anything. Ever. All it does is sleep there, so far from any populated space that the only reason anyone knows the big lizard is there is because any civilization with a lick of survival instinct tracks the Phoenix Force. When THE cosmic force of the universe, which has gone unchanged since the dawn of time, starts to spend all its time hanging around one spot? Everyone notices. And then they get curious. And then, the Sleeper’ rescues’ them.”

“’Rescues?’”

“See, Big White doesn’t do anything,” Lobo laughed. “But curiosity killed the Flerken and all that. So some hotshot explorer gets it in his head that he can land on the Jewel, or the beast, or get samples or whatever. But the Sleeper’s in his Dream, see, so nobody can touch him. But people are stupid, so they hang around. But if you hang around too long, you start to Dream too.”

“What does that mean?”

“Who knows?” Lobo shrugged. “But being around the Sleeper is bad business. Once you start to Dream, it talks to you. And from there, it chases you away. You wake up, and you’re back in the known Sectors. It’s been weeks. That’s the rescue. If you’re smart, you take the Sleeper’s warning and try to forget everything. You go on living your life like nothing happened.”

“And if you’re not smart?”

“Then you go back. Maybe only once. Maybe you go back over and over again. It’s costly. Every time you’re ‘rescued,’ your ship gets fucked up somehow. Usually, it is your fault. When you Dream, you get… violent.” Lobo’s smile was predatory, but Carol didn’t let it intimidate her. “And every time you come back, you are just a little bit… off. The Dream lasts a little longer. And every year, the Sleeper gets a little bit bigger. A tad more powerful.”

“Cut to the chase,” the heroine demanded. “Why is the ‘Sleeper’ a problem?”

“Because it drives you mad,” Lobo cackled. “Anybody, anything, that meets the Sleeper goes a little bit insane. A part of their minds are left in the Dream. Even if you watch from a screen projected from the other side of the galaxy, seeing that beast is enough to tweak you just a tad. Get enough people leaving enough of themselves in the Dream, and they’ll start talking about the Sleeper. The madness spreads. A ship went silent here. A lost colony there. People investigate. They discover blood and bodies and want to know why. So, the madness continues to spread. It was called the Dream Plague.”

A shiver ran down Carol’s spine at the gleeful look in those red eyes.

Lobo was many things, none good, but the bounty hunter should never be described

as a fanboy.

“There are entire star systems that had to be purged,” Lobo laughed cheerfully. “Star charts needed rearranging so people didn’t start asking questions. Famous doctors, scientists, and psychics have tried to study the Plague and fell to it. They all go mad, craving blood. Entire planets have turned into mad beasts, tearing each other apart in a hunger for blood that is never satisfied. That was millions of years ago.”

“The universe has a long memory, it seems?” Carol sighed. That was not reassuring. She suddenly remembered Diana expressing concerns about odd dreams and knowledge before she left. She’d need to get back soon and warn everyone. They needed to get that dragon off Earth. “That’s why nobody talks about it? They’re scared of a ‘plague?’”

“The Dream Plague was not a sickness,” Lobo laughed. “It’s spread by knowledge. Knowing about the Plague was sometimes enough for weaker species to be infected. The Lanterns have stricken the Sleeper from their records, but the guardians remember. They designated its area a forbidden zone. Big wigs know, but they don’t want the plebs to suddenly get curious, hop in their ships and wipe their civilization from the star maps, do they? So, the Sleeper is a bedtime story; only a few know what it looks like. Maybe a hundred living beings in all the universe have ever seen the Sleeper.”

“Yet you know all of this?” Carol asked, eyebrow raised.

“What can I say,” Lobo laughed. “I am a fan.”

Then he took the jagged edges of a broken bottle and stabbed it into the back of his head.

Carol reared back, ready for anything, but the Czarnian just watched her, amusement in his red eyes as he carved a piece of his skull off of his head with brutal, jagged strokes of the broken bottle.

The bone, with the bloody scalp and bits of brain matter still attached, fell to the bar counter. Then, after dropping the broken bottle, Lobo grabbed the healing section of his skull and tore off another piece.

Bending down, he picked up the discarded skull fragment and held it in his left hand while his bloody right hand held the other piece. He presented them to Carol, who was staring at the gory display in horror. Lobo laughed wildly at her face, barely managing to get his words out through his humour.

“This is Krinxle,” he said between guffaws of delight as he shook the left hand. “And this is Tim.”

Affixed to the bone, nestled within brain matter, two red eyes blinked at Captain Marvel.

“I named Krinxle,” Lobo said proudly. “The Sleeper named Tim. It’s pretty cool. I was

going to get my third, but I wanted it to be a special occasion, and it told me that if it saw me again within the century, it'd make me eat my dick."

"He, it, did that to you," Carol stared at the eyes, also narrowed in glee, in abject disgust.

"You don't get it, toots," Lobo laughed as he crushed the fragments of his head, eyes and all, into a paste in his hands. "The Sleeper doesn't do anything. It's only half real, half Dream. Everything that happens, the blood and death and Plague and all that shit? That's a byproduct—a ripple from a snore. If the Sleeper ever wakes, that's when the real shit will happen. And man, is it going to be awesome."

The Sleeper, the Elden Lord, was awake.

And he was on Earth.

******

"That will not happen on Earth," Batman said firmly.

Captain Marvel had been the first to wake up, and he was taking the opportunity to debrief her while they waited for the rest to do the same.

"I looked into it," Captain Marvel said through gritted teeth. "Lobo wasn't blowing smoke. A secure Kree repository contained records of the Dream Plague. Entire civilizations disappeared in a few years. Seeing the Sleeper, the Elden Lord, is an automatic death sentence from the Supreme Command. That area of space is the only place the Shi'ar don't follow the Phoenix."

"Other civilizations know about him and haven't been destroyed," Batman countered with facts. "Or there'd be no record. We know of a few. The Voldi have an entire mythology based around him. He flew through Shi'ar space to get here. A Green Lantern was the one to warn us. If the Elden Lord were such a threat, the first time he was noticed, the entire universe would have descended on him."

"That's because they can't connect the two," Carol said slowly. "To the people who know the truth about the Sleeper, as soon as I describe him, they shut up. But if I mention it moving and flying through space, they direct me to spaceships or aliens that look slightly like what I describe. They are fundamentally unable to accept 'the Sleeper' waking up. If it is moving, it cannot be the Sleeper. That's how it's managed to travel the universe without being noticed for so long. Its reputation for being unmovable is so absolute that it can come and go from Earth or any other planet without being recognized."

"I have noted a cognitive dissonance around him and his Family," Batman nodded. "A slight stranger effect that prevents all but the most basic of observation and distorts the

recognition of facts until they cease to matter to him."

"SEE!" Captain Marvel cried. "The Elden Lord is the Sleeper."

"I never said he wasn't."

"Then why are you ignoring my warnings?"

"Because I have to work with data I can verify, not hearsay from millions of years ago," Batman told the woman sternly. When she looked ready to argue, he held up a hand. "I am not ignoring your warnings. Your story is completely possible. Likely even and has helped answer several questions I have. But it is filtered too much to be reliable. And you have not been on Earth in months. You do not understand the state of the world."

"Then explain it to me," Carol said, crossing her arms. "I am gone for a few months, and suddenly, the Elden Lord is all anyone can talk about. He has a fucking religion. His wives are international heroes. And just yesterday, one of the most powerful and successful women in the world just declared, on national television, that she was working to join his damn harem! The world has gone mad while I've been gone. I am half convinced the 'Dream Plague' has already infected everyone."

"It hasn't," Batman said with absolute certainty.

"How can you know that?"

"Because I know how it spread in the first place," Batman said, pulling up his file on this subject. "What you found is correct. The Elden Lord is a cognition-hazard." When Carol made to say something, he bulled on. "But it is not to his benefit. It is a metaphysical leak, possibly from the information dimension. He cannot control what knowledge is leaked. He calls the 'Truth,' the knowledge of the world. Mortals do not handle it well. If exposed to something they cannot handle, they descend into 'Frenzy.' But, if given time to acclimatize, it is 'Insight.' What Diana experienced is such an 'Insight.'"

The screen flashed through the files he had built on the subject. The records, both written and testimonial, from Wonder Woman and Amelia. Scans and pictures from the runes carved into Panacea's flesh. And evaluations done by scientific and magical means.

As Carol had reported, it all pointed to the fact that this 'Frenzy' and 'Insight' were byproducts of the Elden Lord's existence.

"Then how," Carol asked slowly, already frustrated. "Is it not a threat!?"

"The Elden Lord is very much a threat," Batman said plainly. "But not for this."

"Why. Not." Carol bit out, feeling like the caped crusader was toying with her.

Months.

Carol had spent months chasing down increasingly unlikely leads. She had been laughed at, dismissed, and even attacked for the line of inquiries. And when she finally had a viable lead, she had been actively targeted.

And when she returned?

The threat she was investigating had practically taken over the world. It was friends with heroes. Its wives were national icons! It killed the damn gods! She and most of the Justice League had been put in a fucking coma, thanks to it!

“He has done everything in his power to limit that hazard,” Batman explained patiently. “Only three times has it ever come into effect. When Diana first saw him. When Panacea built him a body. And before Heartbreak. They all have one thing in common. It was when others were exposed to his non-masked presence.”

“Explain.”

“You are familiar with Wonder Woman’s circumstances. Panacea directly interacted with his blood and worked with this ‘truth.’ Thanks to the runes, she has the greatest Insight but is the most protected. Both were not enough to clue me in. The minor Stranger effect prevented me from connecting the dots. But the last incident gave me all I needed. Before Heartbreak, while battling the gods, every single Amazon still living was exposed to what Wonder Woman described as an ‘Unknowable Horror.’ That was the Elden Lord’s true body.”

Carol’s frustration slightly faded. She was friends with Diana and knew how tough the girl was. She had stared down the worst this world had to offer without a flinch. For her to use terms like that…

“Nico Robin, Consort Diana, and Scathach were, unsurprisingly, unaffected by the sight,” Batman continued, pulling up more evidence. Testimonies from the Amazons. Surveillance records from after Heartbreak. Even psychological reports on Diana’s sister. “In the weeks since, Diana experienced higher-than-usual bursts of Insight. But her fellow Amazons demonstrated the same initial symptoms she did when first exposed. Currently working with the Titans, Troia is a repeat of Diana’s circumstances. The only difference being the Insight gained.”

From observing Troia, Batman understood the risk of ‘Frenzy.’ The term for those who fail to handle the ‘Truth.’ According to Troia’s Insight and a study by Panacea and her own experience, slow accumulation of Insight was the best way to gain Eldritch Knowledge. Still, there was always a risk of being confronted with something they couldn’t handle.

“You are not making me less worried, Bruce.” Batman’s jaw twitched at the name, but he continued patiently.

This was as much a debrief about her mission as it was a brief on the current knowledge of the Elden Lord. Batman did owe her that much for all the effort she put in.

He was still keeping secrets, of course, like his belief in a thirteenth wife or his concerns about the Phoenix Force’s role in Mikael’s plans. She didn’t need to know

everything, after all.

“They were all Amazons,” Batman pointed out. “Supernaturally gifted women. They are adapting. Turning ‘Truth’ into ‘Insight’ rather than ‘Frenzy.’ But, if the ‘Dream Plague’ is such a threat, why haven’t we seen it spread among regular humans? The Elden Lord has been here for months.”

“I get the feeling you’re going to tell me,” Carol breathed through her nose.

“Information control,” Batman said, and there was a note of something in his taciturn voice. Approval? Pride? Something like that. “The Elden Lord, and to a lesser extent, his Family, are obsessed with only releasing information about themselves that they control. They only want people to know what they allow them to know. They frame everything in a way that benefits them. Insight is a direct threat to that. They don’t want that spread.”

“Just because they don’t want to be a threat, does not mean they are not.”

“During our first official meeting with the man,” Batman shook his head. “After the Doomsday incident, he explicitly stated that there shouldn’t be more leaks now that he had a human body. A small comment. One I overlooked thanks to the stranger effect, but was proven when he exposed the Amazons.”

“Meaning what?”

“It means exposure to his non-human body, such as the squid form we first knew him as and his Dragon form, is a catalyst. Exposure to those is what leads to leaks from the information dimension. Information he doesn’t want leaking. Possible weaknesses. Plans. Sources of power. He has no control over what comes out, so he does his best to limit the ‘Insight’ others gain. His paranoia prevents the spread of ‘Frenzy.’”

“And, while he was sleeping, it tried to direct people away,” Captain Marvel was starting to put the pieces together herself now. “Only those who returned frequently contracted ‘Dream Plague’ from continued exposure to its draconian body. But that does not explain how entire planets fell to this ‘frenzy’ you mentioned.”

“It does,” Batman grunted. He was already explaining more than he liked to share, but if he wanted to prevent Captain Marvel from going off half-cocked and messing with the Elden Lord, he needed to share what he could. “If knowledge of the ‘truth,’ as he calls it, is the source of the Plague, then if someone gains enough Insight, they will gain enough knowledge to be a source of dissemination as well. Proximity to them will lead others to gain ‘Insight.’ And knowledge compounds knowledge. It would snowball.”

“So it’s slowing the spread by limiting knowledge about itself,” Carol agreed. “Still, it has only been a few months, and it has leaked. Given enough time, despite any effort the Elden Lord takes, would fail to contain the Plague.”

“It will take decades for that to happen at the current rate,” Batman shook his head

and pulled up the final piece of evidence. It had been sitting in the Elden Lord's file for weeks, wholly disregarded until today. "Look at this."

"Todd and Carl Cook?" Carol read the file. "Who are these two? I am not familiar."

"They are a recently wed couple who spent their honeymoon in New York," Batman explained. "Completely unremarkable except that they spent hours with the Elden Lord, Medea, and Glynda Goodwitch. They had breakfast together at a small cafe. That day, Mikael contacted the Sorcerer Supreme to alert him about the Endbringers. I placed them under surveillance just in case."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing."

Batman almost smiled at the surprised and frustrated look on Carol's face. Almost.

"Then why are they important."

If Batman had been a playful man, he might have joked about 'the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.'

But he wasn't a playful man, and there was every possibility Carol Danvers had never read Sherlock Holmes.

"The lack of signs is an important sign," Batman said. "These two spent hours with the Elden Lord while he was not in a human body. And yet, months later, they have not shown the slightest hint of Insight or Frenzy. Yet a few seconds was enough to leak Truth to Diana? And one glance was enough to put Amazons on their knees? Why?"

"Because there's nothing special about them," Captain Marvel wasn't stupid. She might not be the world's greatest detective, but she could combine pieces. "They're human. Mortal. Not Supers or mutants or anything."

"My current hypothesis is the more powerful you are, the easier it is to gain Insight," Batman nodded. "Conversely, the weaker you are, the harder it is to gain, but you are more susceptible to its negative properties. To 'Frenzy.' And, if the Elden Lord does not wish knowledge to spread, he will leave before a local population starts gaining. It explains his nomadic nature more than the idea of searching for 'concerts' that we initially believed."

"It comes to a planet, possibly in another dimension, ingratiates itself with the local populace with beneficial actions, and leaves before the 'Dream Plague' spread?" Carol asked as she followed along.

"Your report says nothing has been able to touch him where he sleeps?" Batman got a nod from his question. "He possibly leaves an Illusion when he's not there. We've seen him cast such magic during the Trigon incident. He uses his intangibility to avoid interference when he is there to sleep and grow more powerful."

Batman was also pretty confident he knew why the Elden Lord needed to rest so long. If, as he suspected, Mikael grew stronger through blood absorption, then it would explain why he sought out worlds filled with conflict.

After 'saving' the world and possibly taking their best and brightest as wives, he would return to his sleeping location to grow some more. Repeating the process over and over again was how he had gained such power while seeming to 'sleep' for millions of years.

Thanks to his psychological profile, Captain Marvel's report, and the observations of power usage for the last few months, Batman had a firm grasp on the Elden Lord, his threat risk, and possible avenues to dealing with him if it came to blows.

One thing still eluded Batman, though.

The Phoenix Force.

If what was reported was correct, and he had no reason to doubt this particular aspect of Carol's investigation, then the Elden Lord had access to the firebird for millions of years yet had never attempted to become its host or empower his wives with it. So why now?

Was it as simple as not having a wife capable of merging with the infamous force of nature?

If Melina were his most recent wife, that would explain why he took it now. For all his almost casual disregard for life, Mikael clearly cared about his wives. He wouldn't risk one of them becoming the Dark Phoenix, not even for increased power.

But there were holes in that theory, too.

Melina was the host. Batman didn't doubt that. Just as he didn't doubt that her appearance at that convention was a deliberate display of her status of host by Mikael. If the Elden Lord desired it, he could have kept her new powers a secret, but he hadn't. So why reveal it?

"I am not convinced," Carol shook Batman from his musings as she crossed her arms. "I see why you aren't worried about the 'Dream Plague,' at least for now, but the fact that it is a threat is non-arguable. You were one of the biggest proponents of dealing with the Elden Lord quickly. But now you're all for keeping it around? After what it pulled with the Phoenix?"

"We know he has the Phoenix Force," Batman grunted. "We do not know it was him that knocked you out. You say you don't remember anything."

"I don't need to remember to put two and two together," Captain Marvel scowled. "It is a threat. One we need to deal with before it is too late. Why are you hesitating? Why are you trusting the dragon after it has repeatedly proven itself to be a risk to Earth."

Batman reminded himself again that Carol hadn't been there. She had not talked to

Mikael even once. Her only experience with the Family was the first fight with Ranni and hearsay after her return. Then, she had been put in a coma for a week.

She didn't know what it was like to feel the terror of six Endbringers attacking simultaneously. She didn't realize how indispensable that 'harem' had been to saving lives.

Carol Danvers had not experienced Heartbreak.

But explaining that… event to someone who hadn't been there was impossible, so Batman had to put it in a way she could understand.

"I know he is a threat," Batman repeated patiently. "I know he has plans. But I will not start a fight with a potential apocalypse until I have to. Do you want to know why I am trusting him? Because I had to. I had no choice. And when I did? He did not disappoint me. Thanks to him and his Family, there is an Earth for you to come back to."

Not counting saving Superman's life. Not counting returning a promising heroine to life and putting one of the greatest healers back on duty. Not counting everything Artoria and the other Diana had done while working with the League. Not counting permanently removing the threat of Trigon the Terrible. Not counting that night they went drinking and… everything that came after.

Even if you ignored all that, the simple fact was that Mikael's presence on Earth had been unequivocally beneficial to humanity.

Batman would always prepare for the fallout, the inevitable moment when the Elden Lord needed to be stopped. He did so for his enemies and allies. In a world of gods, a man always needed to be prepared.

But Batman would eternally hope never to use such plans.

Anyone could do good.

If he gave up that belief, he wouldn't be a hero.

******

"Leave us."

I didn't order my Family around most of the time. They weren't my slaves or servants. They were my wives. And I preferred having fun rather than being serious, dour, and grumpy.

Why be miserable when you can laugh?

That didn't mean I can't.

I knew how to project authority when I needed to. A tone of voice, a change in body language, and blunt word choice could all lead to a greater sense of gravitas than I usually employed.

Still, I didn't like acting like this to my wives outside the bedroom.

Even if they wanted me to.

Emma paused mid-sentence as I appeared in Frost's office and left the room to stand guard outside without even looking at her counterpart—complete obedience.

The unconditional surrender, without question, from my wife set the tone for this meeting precisely as I had planned.

It wasn't easy to intimidate someone like Emma Frost.

But it was possible.

"You've put me in something of a conundrum, Ms Frost," I said pleasantly as soon as my wife shut the door behind her, not giving the woman time to think.

I sat myself in one of the chairs she kept for guests, slightly lower and less fancy than her own, as a subtle powerplay. But I was so large that I still towered over her, even with the height difference.

"Elden Lord." To her credit, Frost recovered quickly and nodded in greeting to me. "I wasn't expecting you."

She was behind the desk, but I was in charge here, and we both knew it.

It was only because it would ruin the dramatic atmosphere I had built that I didn't make a 'Spanish Inquisition' joke.

"Call me Mikael," I ordered. "And you should have after what you pulled yesterday."

"Your wife was just discussing the subject with me," Frost said, and there was a touch of brittleness to her otherwise sharp smile. "I admit, it was a reckless thing to do, a spur-of-the-moment whim, but I fail to see how it can be anything but a benefit for both of us."

I had no doubt Emma had been tearing her a new one. Frost's 'proposal' during yesterday's interview had been entirely unplanned. As far as Frost knew, the plan had been to slowly get closer to me, using Priscilla as an excuse to come into contact more often. From there, she'd try and seduce her way into the Family.

Emma had her own plans and reasonings for those plans, but I was simply going along. If feelings did develop, which was unlikely, I would talk with the rest of the Family.

It was supposed to be a harmless exchange of benefits, even if Frost never became one of my wives.

My Family, mainly Emma, would back her endeavours and grow her business and power in the Hellfire Club while we gained access to her funds and aid in progressing Priscilla's music career.

A business relationship with the potential to turn into romance after a few years and a lot of luck on her end.

That had changed yesterday.

As soon as she had said the words, I had Emma dive into her mind to discover what the mutant had been planning. What Emma had found was as damning as it was, in retrospect, obvious.

Emma Frost hadn't been planning anything. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision to reveal her goal. Because by doing so, she fundamentally changed the nature of the deal she had with my Family.

Our plans with her relied on keeping the exact nature of our relationship a secret.

By declaring she was trying to get into my pants, she had invited everyone even slightly interested in me and my Family to dive into her business, her dealings, and their possible relationship with us.

Her enemies in the Hellfire Club would be wary. The X-men would trust her less. The Illuminati, who had been scouting her, would never ask her to join now.

Priscilla's career will forever be marked by stigma. People would have always been suspicious of how she started so quickly, but now they could point at Frost and declare, 'Priscilla only got where she is because of her husband!'

Which was precisely the opposite of what I wanted for my floofy dragon. I wanted her to stand on her merit, to break out of the shell that her past confined her to.

Frost's declaration had almost only downsides for both her and us.

So why had she done it?

Her goal had changed.

It had gone from 'Use the Elden Lord to gain power.' to 'Use power to gain the Elden Lord.'

Frost didn't want a business relationship anymore. She wanted exactly what Emma had, what she had been promised. And when she saw the opportunity to change the dynamic of our deal, she took it before we could stop her.

It had been a spur-of-the-moment, completely unplanned, and I couldn't help but admire it.

But just because I admired the move didn't mean I was happy with it.

Was 'Emma Frost' forever cursed to confound me?

Frost took my silence as an excuse to lay out her arguments.

"My statement is front page news," Frost said with a smile, lifting a newspaper from her desk and displaying it. Across the front was a picture of me, with separate pictures of Priscilla and Emma on either side. 'Love and Music?' Was printed across the front. "Everyone in the country now knows about the concert. Tickets are already sold out."

"They would have been without you saying what you did," I answered simply.

"But now her momentum is unstoppable," Frost insisted. "Rumors and theories will

ensure she won't have an empty seat for at least a year. Her music will take over from there."

At least Frost wasn't ignoring Priscilla's skill. Still, that wasn't what this was about, and we both knew it.

"I fail to see how ticket sales are worth breaking our deal."

"I didn't break it," Frost insisted with a frown. She looked just like my wife, but I felt nothing for her. She wasn't Mine, so even though she looked the same, she was nowhere near as beautiful as my Emma. "I saw an opportunity to increase my usefulness to you, and I took it."

I almost smiled. She did it for me, did she?

"With our relationship out in the open," Frost explained. "We can be seen in public together. Me, or your wife. She won't need to remain hidden anymore. It also will allow me to allocate funds towards your goals, provide aid that I couldn't before, and push for a more aggressive political lobbying initiative than originally planned. Anybody suspicious will see it as me trying to seduce you."

"And I am sure you gain nothing from this," I drawled sarcastically. "I am not ignorant of how business works on this planet. I am sure you are aware of your stock prices."

With one sentence on national television, Emma Frost had almost doubled her economic value as stock traders hopped on the Frost Enterprise train.

I didn't blame them. If I knew a company was gaining connections to someone who could cure almost every disease, resurrect the dead, and had more power than countries, I'd hop on that as soon as possible as well.

"A fortunate coincidence," Frost waived off my point quickly as she stood from her desk and walked around to stand right in front of my chair. "We both know money is useless in front of power."

Frost was objectively beautiful. Even ignoring that my wife was deliberately feeding her information about my preferences, Emma Frost was one of the most beautiful women in a world where 'comic book pretty' was the standard. She was dressed for 'work' in a business skirt, white blouse, and stockings, but she had added her own touches to make her platinum blonde hair and ice-blue eyes stand out.

Emma Frost was beautiful, and she knew it.

"And you have power," she practically purred as she leaned over me, giving me a generous view of her cleavage. "You could do anything, and there is nothing anyone can do to stop you. I want that. You know I want that. And you want me. I know you do."

With a practiced ease, Frost unbuttoned two more buttons from the top of her blouse.

Her white corset only accentuated her amazing breasts, and her pale nipples peaked tantalizingly from behind the fabric.

For the first time since I arrived, I smiled.

“Twins are a common fantasy,” Frost whispered in my ear. She was almost sitting on top of me, my face practically pressed her to her breasts. “You could have us both. Right here. Right now. On my desk. On the floor. Wherever, whenever you wanted.”

Part of the reason I had chosen Emma Frost when building that first short story so long ago was because she was exactly my type.

I didn’t like damsels in distress. I liked women who knew what they wanted. Who were intelligent, capable, and powerful.

And I liked taking that all for myself.

Emma had done an excellent job with Frost.

But Emma had made one mistake.

“My company? It’s yours.” Frost’s ice-blue eyes never left mine as she trailed a finger down my chest. “My power? Use it. My money, fame, name? You can have it all. Body, heart and soul included. All I want is for you to look at me like you do her.”

Frost wasn’t Mine.

“You haven’t earned that.”

My finger pressed against her forehead, stopping her in place.

With enough force to dent steel, I pushed.

Frost had to turn her head to diamond to keep it from caving in from the pressure, but it didn’t stop me.

I rose to my feet slowly, pressing my finger against the center of her forehead, right above her nose, as I loomed over her.

I stepped forward, and Frost had to stumble back as the pressure on her skull mounted. I stepped forward again and again, and she backtracked, her poise ruined as I pushed her and pushed her until there was nowhere to go.

Frost’s back met the wall of her office, and she pressed herself against it, diamond eyes wide and fearful as they met mine.

It was genuinely impressive what she had done. Frost had gone from being thrown for a loop by my arrival to trying to turn it to her advantage. Then she had used our privacy to try and seduce me.

She was precisely the type of woman I liked, who pushed back when I pushed.

But I wasn’t here to be seduced.

I was here to make a point.

“You are right. Everything else is useless in front of power.” The nail of the finger

pressing against her forehead turned to a draconic claw, and diamond shattered. “Until I look at you like I look at them, you are nothing to me. I can have my wife kill you and replace you, and I will gain everything you could give me without the headache. Don’t think you are more important than you really are.”

I leaned forward, my claw halfway through her diamond skull as I let go of my control of my Mask.

Not the whole thing, just the hand pressing her against the wall.

Barbed tentacles caressed her diamond face as I whispered in her ear.

“You altered the deal. You will not do so again.”

Then I left her to collapse to the ground, her diamond skull knitting itself back together as she law sprawled against the wall, blouse undone.

It wouldn’t hurt Frost. I knew her diamond form could repair itself from much worse than that. But the message was sent.

I met Emma in the hallway as I closed the door behind me.

“I will play along with this,” I told my wife. “I might even come to like her in the future. But it will never be at the others’ expense. Do you understand?”

“I do.” Emma bit out, her fists clenched. “It won’t happen again.”

“I know.” I hated pulling shit like this, but the message needed to be sent.

Frost was right. Her declaration had helped sell tickets and drum up advertising for Prisilla’s career. But that wasn’t Priscilla’s goal.

Priscilla loved music. More than even I, she just wanted to sing.

I was all for working plans around her events and using them to further my goals. Spying, politics, and manipulation were fair game. If it helped the others, like Emma, then even better.

But that was only on the outskirts. Not the show itself.

Frost had fucked that up by making that show about her when she should have only been there as background noise. A curiosity like Ciara, but ultimately only highlighting the floofiest of my wives.

Once Priscilla was on the stage, it was her show.

Just her and the music and the fans.

I did not want to taint that pure love of music with my, or Frost’s, bullshit.

Frost could pull whatever she wanted with me, but Priscilla was taboo.

They both needed to remember that.

I let out a deep breath, getting my mind out of the state it needed to be in for a show like that.

“So,” I asked with a grin, and Emma relaxed her clenched fists as I waggled my eyes

suggestively. “How wet did that make you?”

“If you don’t fuck me right now, I am going to scream.”

I was about to oblige her after relocating the venue when my phone rang.

Only five people outside my Family had my number, so it was better to answer it than not.

“What’s up, pipsqueak,” I asked Valeria as I watched Emma drag up her skirt, exposing her garter belt and stockings.

“Mikael,” the little girl on the other side cheered. “Great. Listen, you know I am on your side, right? Like, I don’t have any other choice, so I have to be, but I still like you and your family, and you are cool and SPACE and-”

“Yep, I get it. Can you hurry a bit,” I interrupted. Emma was giving me a full-on strip tease, swaying her hips to a beat only she could hear. “A bit occupied at the moment.”

If I was a bit keyed up, sue me. I just had two versions of the same beautiful woman try and seduce me. One of which was my wife.

I could easily ignore Frost because she wasn’t Mine, but Emma was, and I knew precisely how wild she got when I got authoritative.

So whatever Valeria had to say better be important, or I would hang up now and move on to more enjoyable activities.

“Did you kidnap a baby?”

…Motherfucker.

Author's Note:

Ah, one of my favourite things about writing is that, because I know how it ends, I can seed important information early on and not have it come up for (in this case) years. It always gives me a tingle when I can do it. *Does that make me a pervert? A writing pervert?*

This chapter marks the end of the setup, so things will be popping off quickly. I was glad to be able to show an outside perspective for a bit. The Family has only been on Earth for a few months, but to somebody who missed all that, it looks like a completely different place because so much has happened. An uncanny valley-esque feeling you get when you return to a place you haven't been to in years. It looks the same, but so much is different that it trips you up.

My take on Bloodborne lore is, as is evident, only my understanding of the game. There is no 100% correct way to interpret Fromsoft's games. In Bloodborne, it took decades between the discovery of the Old Blood and the beast plague. The dissemination of knowledge and blood were the key reasons why Yharnam became the way it was.

One can gain Insight without Blood and Blood without Insight. They are two separate systems. Two currencies. Only by having both can one ascend.

If everyone but you is mad, does that mean you are the insane one? Food for thought.

Anyway, I have released the first few chapters of my other fic, 'On The Bench,' an Attack on Titan/High School DxD fic that focuses on characters rather than action. If that sounds like something you'd like, give it a read.

Rapturous Rhapsody will continue to be my priority, and I still guarantee a release every Friday, but On The Bench will be released every Tuesday until RR is done, then will move to a two-chapter-a-week format until it is done. I expect OTB to be short (only about 150k at most), so they might finish around the same time.

I will see you all next week.

OBSESSION IV

"An obsession is an idea which you must get out of your mind if you are not to go out of your mind."
-Evan Esar

Kidnap a baby?

I rolled the question around in my mind, trying to ignore the fact that I had just been cockblocked.

A few thoughts came immediately to me.

Such as: What the fuck are you talking about? What baby? Why would I kidnap it? And why do you think I did?

It was such an absurd thought.

'Kidnap a baby.'

You can't get information from babies. Even if they did have a superpower, babies could not be trusted to control it. And the protection of infants is an evolutionary trait that every successful species has developed and would be sure to trigger the most irrational of impulses.

Babies are absolutely useless as everything but hostages, and even then, they are shitty ones because they are so fragile and need constant care and attention, or they'd die and lose all their value.

I was a dragon the size of a sub-continent.

If I wanted a hostage, I had the entire world.

'Kidnap a baby.'

It sounded absolutely stupid. That's the kind of brain-numbing thing a comic book villain would do. And not a good one.

'Batman Vs. The Toddler! The diapered menace that kidnaps babies.'

It was so stupid.

"I should have kidnapped a baby," I said into the phone.

Emma was holding her head in her hands, all thoughts of kinky sex in her counterpart's home long gone as she grew exasperated with me.

"What?" Valeria sounded absolutely flabbergasted.

"I didn't kidnap a baby, duh," I explained the obvious. "But I should have."

"Don't-" Emma tried to stop her, but it was too late.

"Why?" Valeria asked with an absurd laugh.

"Because it would be funny, of course."

Valeria Richards was physically unable to feel anything but the positive emotions in life. Anger, frustration, sadness, or despair were beyond her.

So when I say that word that came out of her mouth over the phone was the most emotionless sound I had ever heard, I was not speaking hyperbole.

"What."

"Why did you have to ask?" Emma groaned into her hand, but I caught the smile peeking from behind her palms.

"It would be hilarious," I insisted. "Think about it. Elden Lord. Fuck-off-dragon bigger than some countries. Can bring back the dead. Husband to a dozen powerful women. Heartbreaker. Demon Lord Slayer. And Baby-kidnapper. I could spend days thinking up headlines."

"What."

"It would need to be done right," I said, caught up in my absurdist fantasy. "I'll grab a domino mask, a bed sheet cape, and grow out my mustache so I twirl it maliciously with one hand while I hold a swaddled baby in the other. It dangles precariously from my hand as the heroes and the news helicopters circle us. I taunt Superman, pretending to let the child slip and fall a hundred stories off the Empire State Building."

"Why."

"Should I go 'hohohoho?' No, too Christmas-y. I am not so deep into the interwebs to go 'trololololo.' 'Mwahahahaha' is always a classic, but it is overdone."

"Wh-"

"Stop asking! He's just going to keep going until you tell us what you are talking about," Emma interrupted Valeria, the smile fading from her face. "He can go for literal hours if he wants to."

"Exactly," I pointed out cheerfully. "I'd keep it up for hours. Then, right when the army has mobilized, I'd drop the baby. It gets rescued, of course, and that's when everyone realizes it's a doll, and the woman crying out for her child on international television is an illusion! That's when the fireworks go off, and everyone knows it's a prank, and they will feel incredibly stupid. Because who, in their right mind, would think I'd kidnap a fucking baby!"

By the end of my little tirade, I was practically growling out the words, my sense of humour unable to keep my ire contained any longer.

I hated, absolutely hated, being accused of things I didn't do. It was one of my greatest pet peeves and one of the surest ways to get me mad.

I was a Dragon of Freedom. I was free to do what I wanted.

And I chose to take responsibility for my decisions and actions. I could try and deny

them, and I would to others if it suited my purpose, but internally, I always accepted what was my fault and denied what wasn't.

I make choices. I chose to accept those consequences.

But only *My* consequences.

When I had gotten over Valeria's absurd question, it was all I could do to stop myself from snapping angrily at the girl.

Which I would have regretted.

I liked Valeria.

No need to alienate her because she did the right thing and, upon learning something REALLY FUCKING STUPID had happened, had sought to verify it with me before making wild accusations.

That, and she was twelve. Kids could believe stupid things.

"Oh, wow," Valeria let out a giggle. "I get it. It was a joke. You have the worst sense of humour I've ever heard. It was terrible. Way too dark. Now that I think of it kidnapping a baby is really stupid. They're never left unattended. If you don't care about being seen, there are better targets. The minimum kidnapping age should be at least five. That's old enough that they won't kill themselves on accident when you're not looking. But what do I know? I've only been kidnapped a few times. Still, your joke was not funny."

"Yet you're laughing," I pointed out dryly. "It is not a bad joke if someone laughs."

"I am mentally impaired," Valeria defended herself, still chuckling. "I can't help but laugh."

"Val," I sighed as I signalled Emma with my thoughts. "The baby thing?"

I couldn't teleport us out, or the phone signal would cut out, so I was leaving it up to her to communicate with the rest of the Family while I kept up an illusion to hide and mute us.

"Right," Valeria chirped as her attention returned to why she called me in the first place. "So, the X-men sent out a call that their leader's wife and newborn baby have been kidnapped. They say you did it."

"What." This time, it was me deadpanning in confusion. Like, seriously, what? "Why?"

"Dunno," Valeria said casually. "They just alerted my family, so I thought I'd call and ask you if you did it."

"No, I did not kidnap a fucking baby," I snapped back, unable to keep the annoyance from rising this time. "Sorry. But no. I didn't do it."

I hated being accused of things I didn't do, and I hated being confused,

Right now, I was both.

"I guessed as much," Valeria agreed readily.

I took a deep breath.

"So Madelyne Pryor and her son disappeared," I verified. Anger would not help me. I needed to focus on the facts and what it meant for me and my Family.

Right away, a half dozen names of possible suspects came to mind.

Mister Sinister was at the top of the list, of course.

If Madelyne was like the one in comics, and all signs pointed in that direction, she was a failed attempt to clone Jean Grey. It was possible that in this world where Grey died, Sinister decided to claim the infant and the clone for his experiments. Or Madelyne had gone full goblin queen early.

There were a few other possibilities, of course. Several villains had tangled with the X-men since they went public a few years ago. Any one of them could have done it as revenge.

But the choice of target was suspicious.

Still, this stank of something else.

I am suddenly framed for a baby-napping the day after I wipe out the Hand and reveal Melina as the new Phoenix Host? And said baby is the future Cable?

It was possible that this had nothing to do with the X-men at all, and they were a convenient source of Supers that could be thrown at me with a pretext. Or the reverse, and they were just trying to throw the X-men at me so I'd keep them occupied.

But to what end goal?

Was this the shadowy Oppressor or someone else?

If they can control Supers, why do they need a justification to throw the X-men at me? Was I just seeing a plot because I was looking for one?

"Yep," Valeria confirmed the victims. "I don't have all the details yet, but they gave me the bare bones of the situation to get my help looking for you."

"Give me what you can," I ordered instantly. Now that the reflexive anger had faded, I could channel it in a more helpful direction. "When did this happen? Where? Why do they think I had anything to do with it? And are they going to come at me guns blazing, or is there room to talk?"

"Talk first," Val answered immediately. "They don't want to risk the hostages. They are looking for you and Melina. It happened last night after the convention. I don't know why they think you did it, but they seemed certain. They have also reached out to the League and PRT. I don't know how the latter will act, as it depends on who they talk to, but the League's members just woke up from their little naps and are not happy with you anyway."

I pinched my brow in annoyance.

So much was piling up quickly. The fallout from the Phoenix, investigating Odin, continual rebuilding after Heartbreak, Frost's situation, and now this?

Fucking comic book worlds, I swear.

Ok.

Organize and prioritize.

This situation was the most urgent just because of its potential fallout and how fast it could deteriorate.

I wasn't afraid of the X-men.

Scathach alone could handle them all. But Charles Xavier and his team had a lot of friends in a lot of places. All my work building this life for my Family would crumble if this went wrong.

I smiled wryly. I was under no threat, but a kidnapped baby was forcing me to respond.

Well played Oppressor.

Let's see if you let something slip with this ploy.

If I were some hot-head comic character, I'd fly off the handle at the accusation, and this would end up one of those 'superhero vs superhero' stories that always seemed incredibly contrived to me.

Instead, I would do the most damage in the best way I knew how.

I would talk to them.

The horror.

"Get back to them," I told Valeria. "Tell them you found me flying and got a message to me. It will reinforce 'Reed's' value to them. Tell them I said I didn't do it and am willing to meet and talk to them. Tell them you can contact me, and we can arrange a meeting point of their choosing, and they can bring who they want, but I will decide the time."

A compromise that at once showed them I wasn't scared of them, was willing to play ball, and that things would not go their way.

This shadowy enemy still had the advantage.

It knew more about me than I did it, but it had also played a hand. Whether the Oppressor was behind this 'baby kidnapping' or not, and I think there is a good chance it is, someone was targeting me.

To try and frame me for this, they either had to be monumentally smart and powerful or monumentally stupid.

In this high-stakes game of poker, they had played a hand.

But I was a little shit.

I was playing Go Fish.

******

“Go over it again,” Batman ordered.

“Why?” Cyclops growled. “We’ve done this twice. Professor X checked my memory. I haven’t been enchanted, cursed, or manipulated. I saw what I saw. And we both know who did this! Now help me get my wife and child back, or so help me god, I will blast my way out of here and find that damned lizard myself!”

He was unperturbed despite the red visor that glared at the Dark Knight.

“You want the League to help you antagonize a potential world-ending threat,” Batman said plainly. “We will. If they are guilty. But we will not do so until we know for sure.”

Strictly speaking, the X-men were an independent hero team. Neither the League nor the PRT had jurisdiction over them. But if they wanted the Justice League to help them, they needed to let them do their own investigation.

“WE KNOW FOR SURE!” Cyclops slammed his hands on the table, but the Dark Knight didn’t flinch even as the field leader of the X-men shouted in his face. “I SAW HIM TAKE THEM!”

“You saw something,” Batman allowed. “But your story has too many holes.” When Cyclops made to shout again, Batman held up a hand, and the hero closed his mouth with a snarl. “Everyone is already out looking. We’ve talked to not only his wives but have managed to reach him, and we have a meeting in a few hours. Your wife and son will be found. That I promise. But for that to happen, we need every bit of information you can provide. So, we will go over it repeatedly until we have dragged out every clue we can get.”

Batman was not without sympathy for the man’s plight. Seeing your wife and newborn child taken while you are unable to stop it was a horrifying thing. But that didn’t change that it was his job to get all the information he could from the man to ensure this did not end in disaster.

And, frankly, none of this sat right with the World’s Greatest Detective.

The method and the motivation might align with Mikael on a superficial level. Still, Batman had extensively studied the Elden Lord’s psychology, as it was one of the only parts of the dragon he could study.

This simply didn’t make sense.

So, he’d keep digging until he found out the truth.

“From the top.”

“Fine,” Scott Summers let out a frustrated puff of air.

“First off, you said you went to bed later than usual?”

“Nathan wouldn’t fall asleep in his crib,” Scott repeated his frustration in no way abated. “We tried for over an hour to get him to calm down. Eventually, we just took him with us. All three of us were in bed and asleep by midnight.”

“Can you remember anything different about your room?” Batman pressed. He didn’t think Scott was lying, per se, but having someone repeat a story repeatedly was one of the easiest and most effective ways to see if their story was consistent and different details tend to get emphasized with each telling. “An unfamiliar scent? Furniture out of place? Change in room temperature? Were there any extra protections in your room?”

“No,” Cyclops growled through clenched teeth. “Nothing. Everything was exactly as it had always been. You’ve seen it. And our only protections were the same as everyone else in the mansion. Guards and cameras. All the more advanced defences were not activated because there was no reason to have them activated.”

Batman had looked over the feed and talked to the X-men on duty. They hadn’t been particularly attentive to their duty, more interested in catching teens breaking curfew than being wary of possible outside threats.

The downside of it being a boarding school filled with super-powered teens was that it was a boarding school filled with super-powered and hormonal teens.

It was not a secure facility by any measure, so a more thorough defensive system needed to be built on the idea that some idiot looking to sneak into someone else’s dorm might accidentally activate a turret. Because of that, the living quarters were utterly undefended, and the trustworthy security measures were confined to the halls and rooms below the ground.

“No reason to be activated?” Batman asked rhetorically, a pang of his own annoyance flashing through him. “I specifically told Charles that Madelyne and your son were best kept secure.”

“They. Were.” Cyclops’ fists clenched. “We were in those rooms for days. We only left when we got notice that the situation had been dealt with.”

Batman wanted to point out that his exact words to Xavier had been, ‘The Phoenix Force does not appear to be after Madelyne Pryor or Nathan Summers.’ He had still advised caution because, at that point, they hadn’t discovered where the psychic entity had disappeared to.

But pointing that out would not help this investigation.

“After you fell asleep,” Batman continued, ignoring his annoyance. “Did anything happen during the night? Did either of you get up, or did the boy wake you?”

“No,” Scott’s anger seemed to slacken slightly. “We were both so tired, we slept for hours. We haven’t been getting much since Nathan was born.”

“You said you woke up when it was happening? What first woke you up?”

“I heard someone talking,” Scott grit his teeth again. “I thought I was dreaming at first. I couldn’t move. I barely managed to open my eyes. He was there. Holding Nathan. The Elden Lord. The one-eyed wife of his, Melina, had Maddy over her shoulder. They were saying something. A language I don’t know. The only word I understood was ‘Phoenix.’ Then they left.”

“You managed to open your eyes? Did they notice?”

“No. It was barely a fraction of an inch, and that took all my effort.” Scott’s knuckles cracked as he relived that moment of helplessness. “With my sleeping glasses, they wouldn’t have been able to see me. They didn’t care about me at all. I might as well not have even been in the room.”

“You could recognize them both in the dark, with your eyes mostly closed, and through your sleep lenses?” Batman asked doubtfully.

“The moon was coming in through the window, and the nightlight was on,” Scott defended himself. “For Nathan. He doesn’t like the dark. And I would recognize those stupid shirts of his anywhere. He had that fucking smirk of his. Her cloak mostly covered the woman, but I got a good look at the scar around her left eye.”

“How long were they there? What were they doing?”

“A few minutes,” Cyclops growled. “They were talking. Then the Elden Lord said something, then he…” Cyclops slammed his fists on the table again, the sound ringing through the cramped room. Then he did it again. And again. He stood, pacing around the room as his rage overflowed as he remembered what he saw. “He threw Nathan. He pretended to juggle my son. That woman laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world. I had to watch my son, my baby boy, get thrown around. And I couldn’t do anything. You better believe I remember them, Batman. I will never forget it for the rest of my life.”

Batman wanted to offer comfort, knowing how helplessness felt, but he forced himself to push on.

“Did they do anything else?”

“They got bored,” Scott spat the word in disgust. “After a few throws. The bastard grabbed my son, said something, and then he spanked Maddie.”

“Spanked?” Batman asked, not having heard this part before.

“He hit her on the butt,” Scott growled, actually shaking in anger. “She was over the woman’s shoulder, and he hit her like she was one of his whores.”

Batman didn't bother asking the man to calm down, deciding it would be fruitless. Instead, he tried to push for more details.

"Why?"

"You think I know what goes on in his twisted mind," Scott snarled. "I don't! All I know is that once I get my hands on him, he will wish he was never born."

"Anything else?"

"No," Cyclops snarled. "After he… After that, he said something about the Phoenix, and they left."

"How did they leave? No camera caught anything going in or out of your suits."

"I didn't see them go. They left my field of vision. But the moonlight let me see their shadows vanish off the wall."

"What time was this?"

"Quarter till four," Scott answered, his anger lowering to a simmer. "I could see the clock from where I was. It was all I could do. For hours I had to watch that damn clock. I only got free once Charles noticed I wasn't down for breakfast and tried to reach me."

"How did you get free?"

"It was a spell," Scott said with certainty. "It had to be. As soon as someone walked through my door, I could move again. No mutant power works like that."

"And from there, you alerted your team," Batman nodded.

The X-men had been prepared to run off and fight the Elden Lord in a rush. It was only at the urging of Xavier that they had waited to contact the Justice League and the PRT.

It helped that they had no idea where to go. The Island? How were they going to get to it? The Elden Lord had closed the dimension a week ago.

"Are we done here?" Scott asked acidly.

"We are," Batman nodded. "Get your team and get ready. The meeting is in three hours."

Without another word, Cyclops stood from his seat, knocking it away as he stomped out of the door. He slammed it open and marched into the halls under Xavier's School for Gifted Children to join his fellow X-men.

Superman entered as soon as the mutant left, gently closing the door and taking the time to reset the chair before taking it and sitting down.

"Should he even come?" Clark asked his friend. "The way he is right now, his presence risks any chance for a peaceful solution."

"Better we keep him within arms reach rather than try and leave him behind to do something stupid," Batman answered as he reviewed his notes. "Find anything?"

“No,” Superman shook his head with a sigh. “Wolverine didn’t get a scent, and I couldn’t find a trace either. Strange did sense magic, but it fell apart when he tried to recreate the scene with a spell. Whoever did this was thorough.”

Batman grunted in acknowledgement but didn’t say anything.

He just kept turning the situation over in his head.

This didn’t make sense.

Even if Bruce ignored everything he knew about Mikael’s psychology, the methodology didn’t match.

Sure, certain aspects were superficially like abilities he and his Family displayed. The teleportation through shadow. The inability to sense them while they were here or to find traces after they were gone. The magic.

Batman did not doubt the Elden Lord’s ability to kidnap Madelyne Pryor and Nathan Summers.

He was doubting his motivation.

And the failure.

Time and time again, Batman came back to the same question. The fundamental flaw in this entire scheme.

How had Scott Summers seen anything at all?

Even if you ignore the fact that he woke up with barely any external stimuli while his child and wife didn’t under much greater stimuli, what were the chances that the method to keep him unconscious failed right then?

Not when the child and woman were taken but when the kidnappers were talking. Gloating really.

And, again, what were the odds he, despite being paralyzed, could open his eyes just enough to identify the kidnappers?

Batman tried to think like the Elden Lord.

He is here to steal a child and its mother while the father is lying beside them. How does he do it?

Easily.

He teleports himself in, casts a spell to ensure everyone is asleep, grabs the targets, and leaves. It takes ten seconds, and nobody learns anything.

Mikael was playful. Dramatic. He liked to perform. It wasn’t out of character for him to make distasteful jokes. But he was also effective. He joked *while* working. Or after he achieved his goal. Unless he was buying time, he would never pause a secret mission and risk discovery just to talk.

It was like he knew Scott was awake and was deliberately trying to make him as mad

as possible.

That would fit Mikael's character if they were enemies, but it would also defeat the purpose of stealth kidnapping in the first place.

Then there was the motivation.

On the surface, it had something to do with the Phoenix Force. What Pryor and her child had to do with it was unknown, but it wasn't impossible that the Elden Lord knew something they didn't because of his experience with other realities. Pryor had always been a point of suspicion due to her resemblance to Jean Grey.

But again, it was just too damn convenient. The only word Cyclops recognizes is 'Phoenix?'

After his friends woke up, Batman had a more complete idea of what had happened on that ship.

Someone had gone through a lot of effort to incapacitate them all without revealing themselves. They weren't malicious, or they would have taken advantage of the heroes' vulnerability, but they definitely didn't want to be found out.

Then Melina shows up in a very public place, clearly showing she is the host of the Phoenix Force? Why the secrecy in knocking the League out, then? And why do it right before you stage a kidnapping ostensibly in relation to said psychic entity?

This entire situation stank of a third party.

But to what end?

And why kidnap Pryor and her son? Targets of convenience? Just to antagonize the X-men, or was there a deeper play here?

"Batman?" Superman asked, tearing Bruce from his thoughts.

"I don't like this," Batman said, standing from his seat to look his friend in the eye.

"I don't think anyone likes this," the Kryptonian tried to joke, but Batman wasn't laughing. Clark knew his friend and decided to help him. "You don't think the Elden Lord is behind this."

"No. I don't. We are being played against each other and need to look at this from another angle."

Superman nodded, not necessarily in agreement but willing to follow along with his friend's train of logic. Batman appreciated it. Clark had been in a coma for a week, been questioned as soon as he woke up, and instead of going home to his pregnant wife, he was dealing with this.

Earth needed heroes like him.

But they also needed cynical bastards like Batman.

"The Elden Lord has the Phoenix Force," Batman started, weaving a situation

together. “Imagine we don’t want that.”

“We don’t,” Superman said with a tired smirk. “It would be better to get that thing off Earth as soon as possible.”

“How do we do that,” Batman asked, turning the thought over.

“We convince him it is a risk,” Superman shrugged. “He cares for his wives. If the Phoenix is a threat to them, he will want it as far from them as possible. Nobody wants another Dark Phoenix.”

Batman paused slightly in his pacing but continued with only a moment’s hesitation.

“What if we can’t convince him to give it up? Either because he doesn’t trust us or because we want it for ourselves. What then?”

“I… don’t know,” Superman sighed. “I honestly cannot think of a way to force him to do anything. Fight him? The collateral damage will be worse than a rampaging Phoenix. Try and steal it? How?”

There it was. The big problem with all of this.

The Elden Lord was too big a mystery.

They knew more now than they did when he first appeared. Both in terms of abilities and in understanding how he worked. But they could guarantee they didn’t know everything.

Even now, if, as Batman suspected, Mikael was innocent, they couldn’t prove it because they simply did not know enough.

What other abilities did he and his family have that they hadn’t revealed yet? What knowledge hadn’t they shared? Mikael had kept the invasion of Trigon the Terrible a secret after all. Who was to say he wasn’t hiding anything else?

It seemed like every day, the fog surrounding that Family grew thicker and thicker rather than clearing up.

And then there were the powers they were known to have.

The threat of another Heartbreak hung over their heads like a nuclear weapon. It went unsaid, but everyone who had felt that… Love, that pain, knew precisely what they could do in the face of it.

Nothing.

“What if this had nothing to do with the Phoenix Force,” Superman proposed, seeing they were at a dead end. He was no slouch when it came to investigations, either. “If the Elden Lord is innocent, it could be an excuse. A Casus Belli to kidnap the woman and child. There might be no deeper motivation than to have the X-men try to fight him.”

“They will lose,” Batman said with certainty. “Easily. It will not even be a contest.”

“Maybe that’s the point,” Superman offered. “Mikael has killed before. Maybe

whoever did this hopes he will kill them?"

That.. was a reasonable proposition.

Was it not the Elden Lord the target but the X-men themselves?

But then, why leave Cyclops alive?

"We need more information," Superman sighed. "Until we talk to Mikael or get more clues, we will only be chasing shadows and theories."

Batman agreed with a nod. No matter whether the Elden Lord was behind this kidnapping or not, meeting him would give them more clues. They'd remain cautious and attend the meeting with everything they could prepare.

Despite his commitment to remaining cautious, Batman couldn't help but feel like they were walking into a trap.

******

"How are you doing," Wonder Woman asked her sister as she pulled away from the hug.

"I am doing well," Donna reassured her older sister, and when the older heroine raised a brow in question, she repeated her words. "Really, I am good."

"She'd be better if she let me give her the Runes," Amelia grumbled. "Then we wouldn't need to deal with this mess every week. I do like my free time, believe it or not."

"Not everyone wants strange symbols branded into their skin, Ames," Victoria rolled her eyes at her sister's complaint. "Think about bikini season! Imagine she's with a guy, and he goes to put sunscreen on her. What's she going to say? 'Don't mind the Eldritch Truth carved in my skin. Get my lower back.'"

"She's an Amazon," Amelia deadpanned. "She doesn't need sunscreen. And a guy? Their entire thing is no guys. Sounds perfect to me."

"That's not the point, and you know it," Victoria gave her an eye roll for her effort.

Tuning out the bickering sisters, Diana kept her eyes on Donna as if she was willing herself to suddenly be able to tell the truth from lies with just a look.

"You are worrying too much," Donna sighed, shaking herself from the older woman's arms and stepping back. "I am fine. I am more worried about you. Nobody has heard from you or most of the Justice League for over a week."

"We were occupied with a mission in space," Wonder Woman brushed over the subject quickly. "None of us were hurt. In fact, I feel better than ever."

"She's right," Panacea interrupted. "She is not only healthier but stronger than ever before. But what did happen? If you tell me, I might be able to replicate it. It was the most

thorough healing I've ever seen, and you are measurably more powerful."

"Can't tell you," Diana said with a tight smile.

Not that there was anything to tell besides the fact that the Justice League had gotten their ass handed to them by the Elden Lord.

Again.

This time, she didn't even know how it happened.

It was incredibly frustrating. It seemed like with every day that passed, they were losing control more and more. Would, one day, they be unable to do anything but watch as the Elden Lord did what he wanted with the world?

And as soon as she woke up, she had to deal with this most recent crisis.

At least they had time for her sister's checkup before the meeting with the Elden Lord.

"Of course, you can't," Amelia sighed in disappointment but seemed unsurprised. "Whatever. Let's get this over with."

Without any further hesitation, she placed her hand on Donna's arm. Panacea frowned as she furrowed her brow in concentration.

"What is it," Diana asked at the expression.

"Just a sec," Panacea said as she released her grip on Donna's arm and placed it on Wonder Woman. Her frown deepened. "Donna, have you had any contact with Mikael recently?"

"No?" Donna half asked a frown on her face as well. "I see prof- that is, Glynda every day for training. She spends more time with me than the others to help me get used to operating in Man's World. And I've seen the other Raven a few times when she visits. But I haven't seen the Elden Lord since… you know."

Wonder Woman's heart ached at the reminder.

It had been barely a few weeks since they had lost so many of their sisters, been abandoned by their gods, and seen their home destroyed.

And she had been unconscious for a good chunk of that time.

She should have been here or at least available for Donna. It had been the younger girl's decision to try and be a hero in Man's World rather than join the other Amazons on the Elden Lord's Island. Still, Wonder Woman should have kept a closer eye on her sister, especially after what they had witnessed through that portal and its effect on them.

Things had been so crazy since Heartbreak, with rebuilding, rising crime rates, and wars springing up in the ruble. It seemed all Wonder Woman could do was fly from crisis to crisis. She hadn't even had time to grieve herself or try and meet her mother since they separated.

"What's up," Victoria asked, floating closer.

“Donna has another Eye,” Amelia reported with a frown. “But Diana doesn’t.”

“What?” Donna asked, startled as her hands came up to her eyes in a panic. “No, I don’t!”

“It’s how insight manifests,” Amelia rolled her eyes, not caring for her fear. “Eyes inside the skull. Unless we crack you open, nobody will be able to see them. They’re what ‘see’s’ the Truth. The runes? They’re what stop me from seeing too much. I don’t have the problem you two do.”

“Oh,” Donna said lowly, not pleased with the idea. Then her eyes widened. “Ohhhhh, that’s what that man was talking about.”

“What man?” Wonder Woman looked at her sister in concern.

“One of the ones in the dreams,” Donna waived her off. “I put it in those reports you’re making me write?”

Diana had yet to have the time to read those reports. All she had gotten was the highlights from Bruce when she asked after her sister.

While Diana’s Insight had been focused on the Elden Lord, manifesting in an answer/question format, Donna’s largely came to her in small scenes in dreams. She had described it like a play she watched, but only a few moments before the scene shifted.

The only comprehensible aspect they had understood so far had been about Frenzy, what happens when Insight runs rampant. Apart from that, it was mostly an incomprehensible blur to Donna.

At least that was what Diana had heard.

Amelia, thankfully, asked the question Wonder Woman wanted to ask.

“Describe this man,” the biokinetic ordered. “What was he talking about?”

“Fat. Old. He was in some sort of chair that moved back and forth,” Donna shrugged. “Mortal, obviously. And blind. He had this mask over his eyes.”

“A swing?” Victoria asked curiously. “Or a rocking chair?”

“Maybe,” the new titan shrugged, not having been in Man’s World long enough to identify either by sight. “Probably the latter, if only by name. Anyway, he was mumbling some strange prayer to his gods.”

“What were his exact words,” Amelia asked, unwilling to lose out on the information.

Diana wondered if she should tell her sister to keep it to herself.

Amelia and Victoria were only slightly trusted by the League for obvious reasons. The healer was still their foremost expert in all things ‘Insight’ related, so they had her do regular checkups on Diana and Donna to ensure there wasn’t a threat to their health, but that didn’t mean they were giving her the information they gained.

Especially since much of that information pertained to the Elden Lord and there was

no guarantee her bodyguard of a sister wouldn't go chattering to her 'boss' when she got the chance.

In the end, Wonder Woman also wanted to know about this, so she kept silent.

"He repeated it over and over," Donna narrowed her eyes in memory. "Let's see. 'We are born of the blood, made men by the blood, undone by the blood. Our eyes are yet to open… Fear the old blood.' Then he repeated that last bit of the prayer a few more times and started over."

"'Fear the old blood?'" Victoria asked. "Is that a prophecy? Like with Trigon?"

"It could be about the Elden Lord," Diana said. "Amelia gained her Insight from touching his blood, didn't you?"

"I did," the healer frowned, rubbing her chin in thought. "But Diana didn't. She gained her first bit of Insight when she first saw him. Then she gained six more eyes after Heartbreak, but it hasn't increased since. You, on the other hand, had seven eyes when I first scanned you. If my theory is right, you should only gain more if you meet Mikael when he is not a human. Or if you are exposed to something of significant relevance to him. So how come you gained more Insight when Diana didn't? And was it transmitted by blood?"

"Have you been in contact with any unknown source of blood since your last scan," Wonder Woman asked her sister.

"No," Donna defended herself. "I am not even allowed on my first mission until Nightwing and Professor Goodwitch tell me I am ready. I've barely left the tower until today."

"I don't think the Boss would let his blood out of his control," Victoria pointed out. "Remember those barrels he left in the park? Raven grabbed them right away. Or was that Pride? Anyway, he clearly doesn't want people getting his blood."

"Then how did she get more Insight?" Amelia remained focused on her job. "Insight doesn't just appear. It only develops in response to things being confronted by things we cannot comprehend with mortal brains."

"Pardon," Donna couldn't help but interrupt their little theory-crafting session. "But does that mean I have eight eyes inside my head? What happens if I get more? Will my head explode?"

"No," Panacea denied instantly. "They are only half real. You could have thousands of eyes, of points of Insight, and all it would mean was that you are more aware of the Truth of the world. You will see and understand things that others can't."

"Then why is it a problem?"

"Because if you are gaining Insight from something," Wonder Woman explained. "It

means there is a source out there. And Insight is a method of handling the truth. The Elden Lord explained it when he brought Glory Girl back. 'Too much Insight risks Frenzy build-up.'"

"Frenzy?" Donna asked, looking scared for the first time. "Like…"

"Like your dreams," Wonder Woman nodded grimly. "We can probably handle it. But if civilians are gaining Insight? And quickly? It will be a problem."

"You don't have any idea where I could have gained this extra 'eye?'" Donna looked at Amelia in worry, but the healer shrugged.

"No idea. One more Eye for you is fine, but if I see more developing, I will insist on giving you the runes, whether you want me to or not. They're what stopped my Frenzy."

"Could it be she is just getting used to what she saw," Victoria pouted, seeming unwilling to have the teen mar her skin before she got to enjoy the beaches of her new home. She had taken a real liking to the younger Amazon. "Like, maybe she's just settling in."

"Maybe," Amelia sighed. "We are having these checkups for this exact reason. But I can't say for sure. I only have myself, Diana, and her to go off on without talking to Mikael."

"What about the other Amazons?"

"They had one checkup, and I haven't seen them since," Amelia scowled. "I don't know if they are also developing more Insight over time or not."

"Why don't we go check on them?" Victoria asked.

"The Elden Lord has closed off his Island," Wonder Woman scowled. Coincidently, it happened around the time the Phoenix appeared. It was one of the reasons she was leaning toward his guilt in the kidnapping incident. Ever since he had arrived, he had been all for letting invaders onto his land to die, and suddenly he wasn't? It was suspicious. "I have not met my mother or sisters since they moved there, and the Elden Lord will not allow us passage given the current circumstances."

Diana would be lying if she said she wasn't worried about the possibility of the man using her family as hostages. After losing so many of her fellow Amazons, she refused to lose anymore.

"What circumstances?" Donna asked curiously.

"I'll tell you about it later," Diana told all three of them. None of them knew about the disappearance of Madelyne Pryor and her son, and if she had her way, they never would.

"You know they don't live with him, right?" Victoria asked doubtfully. "They have a village set up away from him."

"How do you know that?" Amelia asked.

“Me and Priscilla chat,” Glory Girl shrugged. “We’ve been texting for weeks, ever since I left confinement. She’s totally adorable.”

Wonder Woman internally congratulated herself for not giving info away to the perhaps unknowing information leak in their midst.

“Do you think you can get my teammates tickets to her performance,” Donna asked. “They are obsessed with her music, but it sold out before they could purchase them. It would go a long way towards bolstering camaraderie.”

“I got you,” Victoria nodded cheerfully with a thumbs up. “We can swing by and ask while we’re there.”

“While we’re where?” Amelia asked suspiciously.

“Visiting the Amazon village, duh.”

“And how are we going to do that,” Panacea sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose in exasperation. “He’s closed off his Island, remember?”

“By going through the door,” Glory Girl said slowly as if explaining something to an idiot.

Then, a grey doorway appeared in front of her.

“By Hera!” Donna shouted, jumping back in surprise since the shimmering wall of energy manifested inches from her face.

“It’s one of the perks I get from the Boss,” Victoria looked at Amelia doubtfully. “I can teleport to his Island whenever I want. I definitely told you about this.”

“No. No, you did not,” Panacea said through gritted teeth.

“You sure?” Vicky asked dubiously. “I’m pretty sure I did.”

“This will lead us to the Elden Lord,” Diana asked, interrupting the argument as she realized what sort of advantage this ability could give the League.

“Eh,” Glory Girl shook her flat hand in a so-so motion. “It takes me to the Island, but I need permission to cross the bounded field if I want to get to their mansion. ‘Cilla tells me the village is right outside that, though, so we’ll fly along until we find them. It’ll be super easy.”

“And you can take all of us? What about coming back?” Wonder Woman hurried to clarify.

“I control it,” Victoria said proudly. “Priscilla taught me how to summon it, hide it from people, and it lets me choose who comes through and who doesn’t. I can open it again to leave the Island, but it will deposit me back where I ported from unless I leave by flight.”

This was big. Huge. One of the League’s most significant problems with the Elden Lord was that they could not get to him if he decided to remain on his Island. He was

untouchable there if he wanted to be.

With Victoria, that was no longer the case.

Then, a chill ran down Diana's spine.

If the Elden Lord ever thought Glory Girl would use her ability against him, he'd undo her resurrection instantly. She'd die again, and they'd lose this advantage.

To say nothing of what Amelia would do if she lost her sister again.

The Elden Lord could never know.

Wonder Woman was about to tell the group they shouldn't do this when Victoria stepped through the portal quickly, dragging her sister along despite her protesting squawk.

Wonder Woman and her sister shared a look of surprise before Victora poked her head back through the grey curtain of energy.

"Well," she asked. "Do you want to see your mom or not?" Then, before Diana could respond, she disappeared again.

"You were not wrong, sister," Donna said wryly. "The people of Man's World are a curious bunch."

"Wait!" Diana hurried to stop the young woman, but it was too late. Donna disappeared through the portal just as the other two had, leaving Wonder Woman alone.

Cursing, Wonder Woman hurriedly typed out a message to Batman and dove through the doorway after them.

Author's Note:

Haven't seen Victoria and Amelia in a bit, so I am happy to be able to play with them again, as they are fun to write.

I also tried to convey just how fucked up some stuff that happens in comics can be. To us, kidnapping a baby seems absurd and pointless, but it happens regularly in comics. I don't know about you guys, but if I were in Scott's place, I would be apoplectic with rage. At the same time, this wouldn't be the first time two Supergroups were pitted against each other by a third party. As old hats at this, Batman and Superman are no idiots and smell something dirty in the water.

Mikael also won't stay still. Just because this is a conglomerate world doesn't mean his comic knowledge is useless. It gives him a place to start.

I am looking forward to the coming chapters. I will see you all next week.

OBSESSION V

"An obsession with control generally seems to reflect a fear of uncertainty."
-Henry Mintzberg

"We really need a tech gal," Yoruichi grumbled as she continued to sift through the electronic files of Essex Corp.'s head office.

The only reason she even knew how to do this much was the fact that Squad 12's system had been simultaneously more and less secure than this world's cybersecurity, and she had spent literal years listening to Kisuke gush about humanity's advances in technology.

That, and the knocked-out CEO, was easy to get information from.

Not that he had anything. This was feeling more and more like a waste of time.

"One would think you would not want your husband to attract any more women," Robin said sarcastically as she psychically searched every inch of the company from beside Yoruichi.

"I am just saying it would be useful to have someone to turn to for this stuff," Yoruichi defended herself. "I can get them in, they do their computer magic, and then we're gone. We would be able to capitalize on Mikael's Tech Talents too. We should seriously consider the idea if we continue to go to worlds where technology is such an important factor."

"If you think Mikael would ever search out a wife for 'usage,' I am afraid I am going to disappoint you. For all his utilitarianism claims, our husband moves based on emotion more than thought. If he ever falls in love again, it will not be because she is useful."

"I am not saying he needs to marry someone," Yoruichi pouted. "Just we need to recruit someone we can trust to deal with this stuff. I am sure plenty of women out there would accept the binding for the benefits and to see new worlds."

"The key is trust," Robin sighed as she opened her eyes. By her expression, the shinigami judged that she hadn't found anything. "We might find someone in another world, but here? We know we have enemies but do not know who they are. Be content with Valeria's aid."

Yoruichi pursed her lips. She understood that Mikael's choice in the short story that started this all had been for the Soulsborne games specifically, and they would go their own ways right after. A technology specialist would have been a waste of points in such worlds since technology was iterative, as Yoruichi well knew as someone who had lived

through the technological revolution.

Before you can make a car, you need to make an engine. Before that, you need to work metal to the proper shapes, with exact measurements, or the pieces won't work properly. The material needed the right properties, and the inventor needed to know every step of the process, or the end result wouldn't work.

Technology was a game changer when it was the product of civilizations over countless years. A pyramid of knowledge and individual inventions built up by generations and generations of people. You do not go straight from the wheel to robot armies. You need infrastructure. Supply lines.

It didn't matter if you knew how to 3D print every object in the world if you couldn't get the energy to power your machine, the rare elements for your creations, or the parts to build the machine in the first place.

It simply wasn't feasible compared to women like Medea or Scathach, who could enchant a platform to fly within minutes.

Maybe it was because she was centuries old, the almost backward nature of Soul Society, or her own preferences. Still, Yoruichi had always felt that technology could not compensate for the weakness of the people who used it. Spiritual powers, or magic, in this case, seemed superior to her.

That had been slightly mitigated by this world and its technological wonders, but even then, it was the heroes and villains, not weapons, that were the greatest forces in the world.

"I'm done here," the former captain of the 2nd squad said when she finally finished following Valeria's instructions. The little device in her hand beeped in agreement.

"Maybe the others had better luck," Robin sighed as they opened a gate back to the Island.

"It was a long shot," Yoruichi shrugged as she followed the former pirate into the doorway, tossing the small device in her hand casually. "What kind of idiot would put a secret headquarters underneath their actual headquarters?"

"The supervillain kind," Mikael deadpanned from his place sprawled on the couch. Yoruichi tossed him the gadget, and he caught it with one hand, ensuring the other remained in contact with Emma. He would drop it off with Valeria for her to go through more thoroughly. "Anything?'

"No," Robin answered for them both. "You?"

"She's still looking," Mikael shrugged.

"You try and find an unfamiliar mind on a planet of eight billion," Emma grumbled.

"There, there," Mikael pat her head affectionately. "You're doing a good job. Yes, you

are. You're the best."

"Don't patronize me!" Emma snapped at him without opening her eyes, forcing him to close his mouth, but Yoruichi noticed she leaned into his touch slightly as an apology.

"I am learning a lot," Melina said, pacifying the psychic slightly. "It is good practice."

"See," Mikael chuckled, the order not stopping him from talking. "Even if you don't find her, it is still a win."

"But I should be able to find her," Emma grumbled. "If I don't, you'll have wasted seals."

"They come back," Mikael shrugged. "I am more interested in the fact that you and Medea both failed to track Pryor down even with me Freeing your abilities."

"That means they aren't protected," Yoruichi nodded as she sat herself on the couch's armrest and ruffled Mikael's hair in turn. It looked fun. "They aren't here at all."

"Yep," Mikael nodded, and far from being concerned, he looked pleased. "But, coincidentally, neither is Sinister."

"So he's definitely behind it," Robin said as she returned from the kitchen, cup of coffee in hand. "Too much of a coincidence otherwise. What can you tell us about him?"

"He's the prototypical scientist villain archetype," Mikael snorted derogatorily. "A perfect example of comic book writers not being scientists themselves. This is all my knowledge from comics, so it might have changed in this world, but he was a geneticist in the eighteen hundreds. Nathaniel Essex became obsessed with Darwin's theory of evolution and, after discovering mutants and the 'Essex factor,' conducted a bunch of unethical experiments to try and learn more. He became immortal thanks to Apocalypse, one of the beings I thought might be the Oppresor."

"Turning Supers into his agents? Decimating the population to ensure only the strong survive? A plan that spans decades? It could definitely be Apocalypse," Emma agreed.

"Right," Mikael nodded but then continued. "Anyway, Sinister got the name because his dying wife called him that. He eventually parted ways with Apocalypse because, while they have the same broad idea about the strong surviving, Sinister sees evolution as the way to make it happen while Apocalypse will kill the weak. Largely normal humans. Thanks to his skill with genetics, he artificially engineered two family lines through social manipulation, Summers and Grey, till the time was right for them to merge to create what he thought would be the ultimate mutant. The next step in evolution."

"But Jean Grey died," Robin nodded along, sipping at her coffee. "And Pryor is only a clone."

"A failed clone," Mikael pointed out. "She only came to life when a portion of the Phoenix Force lit the spark of life in her after it left Earth the first time. But she had no

mutant powers, so he altered her memory and released her into the wild. He hoped her children with Scott would at least have some of the potential he wanted to continue his work. Unfortunately, she goes off the deep end. Has a psychotic break and becomes a villainess partly out of jealousy because Jean Grey isn't actually dead in the comics. She becomes the Goblin Queen, and her child, Nathan Summers, is sent to the future to survive a virus and returns as Cable."

"What, exactly, are Sinister's abilities? And what other opposition can we expect," Yoruichi tried to bring Mikael back on track. She knew he could go for hours on topics that interested him.

"He isn't a natural-born mutant," Mikael explained. "But he is a genius geneticist and has had a lot of time to practice on himself and on others. This includes giving himself abilities from other mutants, so I can't say for sure what he'd be able to do. Psychic abilities are almost guaranteed, from mind reading and control to paralysis to turning off mutant powers. None of that is a threat to us. His two main areas of concern are how difficult he is to kill and his cloning abilities."

"Like my fruit?" Robin asked, and another version grew out of Mikael's back and leaned forward to blow a puff of air on his ear for emphasis. He shuddered as the second body disappeared in a flurry of pink petals.

"No, but you are getting a spanking later for that," he grumbled good-naturedly. "They are independent clones, not directly connected together, so even if we kill him once, there is no guarantee there isn't another version hanging around. And each clone might have different powers. Also, to kill even one body takes a lot of effort. Not only is he a shapeshifter, but he also regenerates, so you need to atomize his body to ensure he is really dead, and he will probably teleport away if it gets that far."

"Hit him fast, hit him hard," Yoruichi nodded sagely. Then she bit Mikael on the earlobe. He flinched and glared at her. Hey, Robin couldn't have all the fun.

"Why is everyone so hard to kill in this world?" Robin sighed, sipping at her coffee and ignoring the pair's byplay. And the fact she started it. "Doomsday, Trigon, the Endbringers, and now this? It is sad that the gods were the easiest to kill."

"We are playing in the big leagues," Mikael grumbled, rubbing his ear. "You don't get there in comic worlds without some sort of immortality, or any B-lister will deal with you before the League, Avengers, or X-men have the chance to. And to be fair to the gods, I took them by surprise before they could ramp up, and I was going all out. I might be a coward, but I know my strength in my real body puts me in the top fifty of this universe. The gods, particularly Zeus or Vishnu, could have kicked my ass with preparation, but they were gods. Arrogant assholes, the lot of them."

“Speaking of,” Yoruichi asked. “Anything on Odin?”

“No,” Melina answered, still with her eyes closed as she worked with Emma to keep looking the world over for Pryor, Sinister, or any of the other people on their hit list. “If he is connected to this plot, he has not shown himself.”

“Until I, Medea or Raven visit Asgard at least once, he’s beyond our reach,” Mikael shrugged. “But I don’t think this is him. It stinks too much of amateur compared to what he pulled with the Phoenix. We’ll deal with him later.”

“So, what do we do now?” Robin asked. “We are meeting the heroes soon. You do know they’ll be ready to fight, right? And doing so will just play into Sinister’s hands.”

“I expect it, too,” Mikael yawned as he casually stretched. “We’re continuing the same plan. Disturb the grass to startle the snake. We can’t find Sinister? We’ll just have to force him to move. It sucks being on the heroic side, you’re always reacting to villains, but if you can force them to react in certain ways, it’s your victory. I have a few plans to force him out, though I would prefer if we caught him ahead of time.”

“How are you going to do that?” Yoruichi asked with a smile, knowing her lover would have some convoluted plan. Kisuke was the same. Did she have a type? Maybe, but it made things easy. She needed to eat, fight, and fuck. The perfect life.

“By being my regular charming self,” Mikael said, his face the picture of innocence. “I shall be reasonable, understanding, sympathetic, and even heroic. I will be beyond reproach. My saintly disposition will force him from his cowardly hiding spot as my radiant glow illuminates the darkest corner of the world. Sinister will be so in awe of my merciful and wise demeanour that he shall come before me and beg for forgiveness.”

As one, Emma, Melina, Yoruichi, Robin and even Raven all smacked Mikael on the back of the head.

“Spousal abuse,” he grumbled as he rubbed the back of his head, but he was grinning. “I’m being oppressed by the majority. Come see the oppression inherent in the Harem System.”

Robin giggled, and Yoruichi rolled her eyes as Emma and Melina continued to sift through billions of minds.

“No, seriously, what is the plan?”

“Meet up with the heroes soon and talk,” Mikael shrugged. “The entire purpose of this whole scheme can only be one of two things. Either it is to target us or the X-men by pitting us against each other or to distract us so we don’t interrupt some other plan. If it is the former, a peaceful resolution is the last thing they want, so it is my goal. If it is the latter, you both will be on our second team and ready to strike while I am there. It’s why I set up the meeting so quickly. The longer we give him, the more chances Sinister or

whoever is behind this has to fulfill their goal, and the more likely communication will break down."

"Then why did you allow them to choose the location?" Yoruichi asked. "If we did, we'd have the ambush potential, not them. We're giving up the field advantage, which will limit us to holding back."

"Eh," Mikael shrugged. "It makes them feel better, but it won't matter in the end. Remember, these are heroes. They are more concerned with collateral than we are. They'll choose something out of the way. And it doesn't matter if they lay traps or bring an entire army. We'll have the advantage, no matter what."

"If you say so," Yoruichi sighed. "I guess I am going to be on the secondary team?"

"You both are," Mikael nodded. "Tsunade and Priscilla will remain on the Island, but the rest of us will either be at the meeting or ready for the counterattack. Emma will keep looking. Meilina will have to come."

"Without you touching me, I can't get through defences without alerting them," Emma cautioned.

"If you find them at that point, subtlety will be pointless," Mikael shrugged.

"What about Victoria?"

"What about her?" Mikael asked Emma curiously.

"She's on the Island," Melina answered. "She brought Amelia, Wonder Woman, and her sister."

"Are they on this side of the Bounded Field?"

"No. They are heading for the Amazon village to meet with their mother."

"That's fine then," Mikael shrugged. "I knew when I brought her back that she'd be able to visit the Island and bring others. It's one of the reasons we have the Bounded Field in the first place. And if they get killed, it's their own fault."

"If you say so," Emma didn't seem particularly pleased with his blase attitude but dutifully kept looking for their quarry.

"If this is going to go down soon," Yoruichi said, standing and stretching. "I'm going to grab a little cat nap. You want to come?"

"No," Robin shook her head. "I am going to finish my book. It might be a while before we have a peaceful moment again. We could be at war with the heroes of this world soon. Maybe we'll be outlaws hunted down for a bounty."

"That's grim," Yoruichi laughed as she left, knowing the pirate's sense of humour. "Let's hope you're wrong."

******

“Gah!” Glory Girl grunted as she punted another crow/T-rex hybrid away. “Yuck yuck yuck yuck. So gross.”

“They’re fascinating,” Amelia disagreed as she held one by the neck, her new Kryptonian biology giving her the strength to carry the monstrosity with one hand despite being five times her size. “They mutated because of some sort of virus or plague. Heightened aggression, stronger bodies, and a limited healing factor at the cost of degenerating cerebral development. The virus acts almost like a more developed form of ophiocordyceps, controlling them to spread even further. It could be airborne, bloodborne, or even waterborne.”

“They’re gross,” Victoria declared imperiously.

“They are quite repulsive,” Donna agreed.

“Is their blood a method of gaining Insight?” Wonder Woman asked the healer as they continued to fly along the border of the magical barrier in search of her people’s new home.

“No. Different pathogens entirely.” Amelia declared easily. “More than that, this virus, this Rot, is… lacking. It’s still deadly for anyone exposed without someone like me, but it is just… empty, I guess is the best way to put it. It’s a biological disaster waiting to happen, and my power loves it, but compared to Mikael, it’s missing something.”

“Like what?” Glory Girl asked curiously.

“I don’t know,” Amelia sighed as the bird turned to slurry in her hands. “It’s like… Insight comes from something greater than the physical. There is a psionic or spiritual aspect to it that I can only barely grasp, thanks to my own Insight and the Runes. This Rot had something like that once, but not anymore. Like it used to be greater but is now just a disease.”

“It is not what we are looking for, then,” Wonder Woman said.

“I think Donna would have told us if she ran into any sort of monstrosity like that,” Victoria snarked.

“It would be quite noticeable,” Donna said with a frown.

“What is it?” Diana asked her sister.

“We have only been in this land for a moment, and we have already been attacked a dozen times,” Donna admitted. “I fear that living here for any length is impossible.”

“Mikael did say this place was a death trap,” Amelia pointed out as she continued to survey the sky and the ground for further creatures of interest. Already, this little trip had given her a bunch of ideas. Just because she wasn’t creating monsters didn’t mean she didn’t find them fascinating.

“They’ll be fine,” Victoria hurried to reassure the younger Amazon while giving her sister a warning look. “The Boss is prickly, but he’s a total softy inside. Priscilla told me they helped set up a bunch of protections.”

“Can you not call her and ask for the location?” Donna asked.

“Don’t have service,” Glory Girl shrugged. “Separate dimensions aren’t covered by my plan.”

“At the speed we are going, it will take us hours to fly over all these mountains,” Diana pointed out. She had to be back soon if she wanted to participate in the meeting. She also didn’t want to let the Elden Lord know Victoria had brought them over. If the Elden Lord was behind the kidnapping, they were on enemy territory. “It might be best to return another day.”

None of the younger women flying with her looked thrilled with the idea.

“We’ve barely looked,” Glory Girl pointed out. “Let’s pick up the pace, give it another half hour, and if we don’t find a clue, then we’ll go back, and I’ll ask, and we can try again next week.”

That would put them close to the appointed time, but Diana could make it. And she really didn’t want to explain the situation to these three. All of them would insist on joining them for the meeting.

Well, maybe not Amelia. She’d probably only go along because Victoria would want to support her ‘Boss.’

And a small part of Wonder Woman also wanted to check on her mother and people. She hadn’t seen them in weeks, and, as Donna pointed out, this place was no Themyscira.

“Very well,” Wonder Woman agreed. “Half an hour. If we have nothing, you will take us back.”

“Great!” Glory Girl beamed, lowering her altitude and speeding up, prompting the others to do the same.

At these speeds, talking wasn’t possible, which was for the best. They skimmed over mountains and valleys in a wide formation, keeping their eyes open for signs of human habitation.

Other creatures tried to attack them, from more deformed crows to drakes, odd butterfly-like creatures, and some land-bound creatures tried to shoot them out of the sky with rocks. The group of women was moving too fast for any of them to really slow them down, though Amelia did end up catching one of the lightning drakes to drag with her mid-flight.

Despite their speed and the incredible amount of land they were covering, it was almost at the half-hour mark before they noticed anything that could point towards the

location of the Amazon village.

It was Diana who saw the bodies and dived into the valley. The other three followed suit at seeing her digression, and soon, all four of them were hovering in the air over a mountain of beast corpses.

There were wolves, mutated dogs, more of the grotesque birds, boars, reptile-like creatures and innumerable other varieties of monsters gathered. They were piled high, hundreds of them. Some were clearly old, dried and dedicated, but others were fresh, with blood still wet from wounds.

Wounds that came from bladed weaponry instead of the natural claws and fangs of monsters.

"Oh god," Victoria gagged. "That stench. Urh, I think I'm going to blow chunks."

"It is most foul," Donna agreed, covering her own nose as she looked around. "What is this place?"

"A burial pit," Diana answered easily. "Look around the valley. The walls will collapse with little effort and bury all this in the rubble. They disposed of the creatures they couldn't eat far from town to prevent disease. It will also mark their territory from other monsters. We're close."

"But why can't they eat these," Glory Girl asked, looking down at the pile of bodies. "Some are obvious, but that boar looks fine."

"We'll have to ask them," Amelia said. She had floated down and was touching one of the bodies. "It's all mixed together, so I don't know what belonged to which animal originally, but there is both Rot and a different pathogen here. Closer to Mikael's blood, but still lacking. Eating any of this will definitely kill you. If you're lucky."

"Come on," Diana said, starting to fly away. "Spread out. They can't be far."

Indeed, the Amazonian village wasn't far, though the inhabitants had seen them well before they saw it. A pair of patrolling guards rose from a concealed position in the crags to greet them mid-air.

"Lady Diana, Lady Donna," the lead guard bowed her head as she and her patrol partner greeted the four. "This is a pleasant surprise. The Queen will be delighted to see you two again."

"Artemis," Diana grabbed the woman and pulled her into a tight hug before letting go to give Donna the chance to do the same while she moved to the second guard. "Thetis. I am glad you two are doing well. You remember Amelia and Victoria?"

"We do," Artemis nodded at the pair. "Well met."

"Hey," Glory Girl waved casually. Panacea held out her hand for the Amazon to take.

Both guards stared at it in surprise for a second before Donna explained.

“Part of the reason we are here is for her to ensure everyone is healthy.”

“There is no need for concern,” the guard shook her head with a slight smile. “We are doing very well with Lord Mikael’s blessing. His wives have been most gracious in aiding us.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Amelia snarked, keeping her hand extended.

Seeing she wouldn’t budge, both guards looked to Wonder Woman, who nodded and took turns placing their hands on hers. The healer didn’t look alarmed, but she was definitely frowning in thought.

“Can you lead us to Mother?” Diana asked, directing the guards’ attention to her once again. “We are nearby, are we not?”

“I’ll bring you to her,” Thetis said easily. “One of us needs to stay here.”

As they started to fly away, with a farewell to Artemis, Victoria lagged a little to fly beside her sister.

“Ames?”

“They have more Eyes,” the biokinetic reported. “Artemis has two more, but Thetis only has one.”

“That’s bad, right? Or is it good because that means Donna’s case is normal?”

“I don’t know,” Amelia admitted. “I’m the best we have, but that doesn’t mean I have all the answers. I really need to talk to that Boss of yours.”

“I’ll talk to Priscilla about meeting with him,” Victoria said.

“Thanks.”

It barely took them a minute to find the Amazonian village. They might have missed it without their guide as it was further from the barrier than they had been searching.

They were greeted with warm words, smiles, and even hugs from the more affectionate Amazons. Nobody stuck around, though, besides saying a few words. They were all busy with something, whether it was building, gathering, or patrolling.

This New Themyscira was a much busier place than the island paradise the Amazon sisters were used to. There was no music, no laughter.

These were the Amazons as they were initially. Warrior women fighting for a place in a world hostile to them.

“This place is so cool,” Victoria said, looking around at the barricades, the houses, and other facilities like the training yard, shrine, and bath house. “You gals built this all in a few weeks? That’s awesome.”

“Thank you,” Thetis nodded her head lightly. “We have not had to use these skills in centuries, but we all were warriors and labourers at one time or another. A few millenia will give you plenty of time to pick up some tricks of the trade.”

“It hasn’t been too dangerous, has it?” Diana asked. This place was clearly much more focused on the martial lifestyle than she could ever remember Themyscira being. There, they trained for competition, sport and to keep in shape. Here, she watched her sisters patrol along walls their home had never needed. “I can talk to my friends. We can find a place to build somewhere else. Maybe Spain? Or America? There are also a few islands that are uninhabited in the Caribbean.”

“Such is not my call to make, princess,” Thetis said diplomatically. “You should talk to your mother or the priestess about such topics. I can say we have not had any casualties, and what injuries we’ve taken have been light.”

“But you have been injured?”

“Nothing that our magic or Lady Tsunade cannot heal,” Thetis reassured the young Amazon. “Lady Medea aided us with our barriers, and Lord Mikael has graciously provided us information on this land’s beasts. We are as safe as we can be. “

“While living right next to a dragon the size of Texas,” Amelia snorted. She carefully tried to touch every Amazon she could, which hadn’t done her mood favours.

It said something that she was more focused on their medical state rather than eyeing all the beautiful and potentially gay women around her.

“It is like the moon, the sun and the sky,” Thetis said philosophically. “Lord Mikael’s true body is beautiful and wonderous when you notice it. The sun glittering off his scales in the dawn or twilight. The white of the moonlight reflecting from the waves and the ocean. We know he has the power to destroy us, but so too do the heavens. We do not let our fear keep us from the beauty of this land.”

“Woah,” Victoria murmured. “I guess that makes sense. Just cause the Supes could flatten the planet doesn’t mean he will.”

Diana wanted to point out a big difference between Clark and Mikael. Primarily a sense of morality and a proven track record. But Thetis was right. If she wanted to convince her people to leave this place, it was her mother she needed to talk to.

“So it is,” Thetis nodded as she led them to the largest dwelling and held the door open for them. “There is also the matter that, like the sky, you only notice Lord Mikael if you look for him. Otherwise, he is just another part of this land. Another range of mountains in the distance.”

Before she continued to lead them to the Queen, Thetis paused and looked Diana in the eyes.

“As I said, Princess, it is not my place to decide what is good for our sisters.” The guard stood a bit straighter, a note of… pride, perhaps in her that wasn’t there before. “This land, it is not paradise. But we are not weak either. It has been nice to fight for

something once more. To not rely on anyone but ourselves for our survival. Our prayers still go to the goddesses, wherever they might be, but Lord Mikael did speak the Truth. We had been creatures of peace for too long, and it cost our sisters their lives."

With her peace being said and all four guests looking at her in surprise, the guard led the group toward a gathering room.

It was definitely a step down from the throne room of Themyscira, more of a collection of chairs along a wide table. The only nod to the Queen's position was the more elaborate chair at the head of the table.

Queen Hippolyta was seated in her chair, leaning forward over a well-drawn map of the mountains and a thick volume as she spoke with Penelope.

"…winter. Which means furs and heartier materials." The Queen said to the priestess. "Even if we do not die from the cold, buildings must deal with snow and insulation is required. We must keep clear sightlines along the paths, which will require manpower. It is better to prepare now while we have the time."

"Snow…" Penelope tasted the word on her tongue. "I have not seen snow in centuries. Can we not alter the enchantments to keep our village warm? These Crystal Lizards are perfect for enchantment."

"In the future," Hippolyta nodded. "This year, we should focus on ensuring our foundations are steady. We can worry about luxuries like enchanted warmth later."

The conversation was very down to Earth, even to be expected, seeing as the Amazons had gone from living in a Mediterranean paradise to in rugged mountains.

Diana was in no way surprised her mother was taking a cautious and thoughtful approach to ensuring her people lasted as long as possible in this inhospitable land.

What was surprising was the fat cat with wings sitting on her lap that the Queen was feeding jerky to.

"Your Majesty," Thetis had waited for a pause in the conversation to introduce her guests. "Your daughters have come to visit and have brought Glory Girl and Panacea."

Looking up, the Queen's face lit in a slight smile as she rose to her feet to embrace her daughters.

The fat cat, dislodged from its nap, gave a yowl of annoyance as it flapped its too-small wings to not fall to the ground. It huffed haughtily as it landed on Penelope's lap, who immediately started petting it to appease its tubby wrath.

"It is good to see you two," Hippolyta said, pulling her daughters into a tight hug.

"You as well, mother," Diana responded. Donna, who had never been away from her parent before now, didn't say anything, just holding the Queen tighter.

"What brings this pleasant surprise," Hippolyta asked, stepping away and giving a nod

of thanks to Thetis to dismiss her. “Have the Teen Titans not been treating you well, dear? You know there is a place here for you if you wish.”

“Things are proceeding well,” Donna hurried to clarify, not wanting the Queen to get the wrong idea. “My teammates have been inviting, if a bit too enthusiastic, and Lady Goodwitch’s training has been invaluable. We are here concerning a different matter.”

Amelia dove right into the important topic with the grace of a rhino.

“Is Mikael drugging you?”

“Pardon?” Hippolyta asked with a frown as she looked over the healer. “You are the Panacea, are you not? What do you speak of?”

“Something is going on with you all gaining Insight when you shouldn’t,” Victoria hurried to explain. Just because Amelia didn’t care about being polite didn’t mean she didn’t. “We just wanted to check up on you all and make sure you are all right.”

Hippolyta looked to her eldest for a bit more context.

“Since Panacea last scanned Donna, she has gained another layer of Insight,” Wonder Woman explained. “I haven’t. Part of this visit is to see if everyone is gaining the same, what risk it could pose, and what could be causing it.”

“Understandable,” Hippolyta nodded. “You have already informed us of the risk of Insight and Frenzy, and Lord Mikael has provided us with more information. You need not worry.”

“Everyone I’ve touched since coming here has at least one more Eye than they should have,” Amelia said with narrow eyes. “How?”

“We have cleared our area of the beasts bearing the bloodborne plague,” Penelope answered as she stood, cradling the cat in her arms. “I am unsurprised we have peeled back another layer of the veil of Truth. Pray, tell me how many Eyes have I gained?”

Panacea reached out to touch the priestess on the shoulder.

“You have four more,” the healer said. “How? And are you sure you don’t want me to heal that leg? Tsunade’s work is fine enough I can just turn the wood to flesh.”

“No,” the priestess shook her head sadly as she continued to scratch the cat under the chin. She seemed unsurprised by the increase in Insight. “I shall keep it as a reminder of my hubris.”

“Why aren’t you worried,” Wonder Woman asked her mother, frustration leaking into her voice. “You have eyes growing in your skull. And the more you have, the greater the risk of Frenzy!”

“As do you, daughter,” Hippolyta reminded the heroine with a chastising look. “And we are not worried because we know what we are doing. We have tools, enchantments for protection.” To demonstrate, the Queen of the Amazons slipped off one of her armbands

and presented it to them.

“**Deep Sea**? **Great Deep Sea**?” Amelia murmured as she traced the runes carved into the metal. “It would be better to have them on your body, but this would work as a stopgap. Did Mikael make these?”

“We did,” Penelope said, nodding at the thick book placed beside the map. “Lord Mikael provided instruction on how to protect ourselves. We will continue gaining Insight from dealing with the monsters of this land, but so long as we do it steadily and without imbibing the tainted blood, we will be safe from the beast plague.”

“See,” Victoria told her sister triumphantly. “I told you he was a big softy. A real tsundere, that’s what the Boss is.”

Diana had more significant concerns.

“Beast plague?” She asked with trepidation.

“An inferior method of gaining Insight,” the priestess waived off her concern. “We gain it by confronting the Truth of the world and Lord Mikael. Slowly. Steadily. So we need not fear Frenzy. You can also gain it by ingesting tainted blood, which heals and strengthens you but risks degeneration into feral monsters. A Frenzy in form as well as in spirit. We have taken great concern to ensure no tainted blood enters us.”

“Then how did I-”

Donna’s question was cut off when the ground shook, and roots the size of buildings tore from the Earth to try and destroy New Themyscira and everyone in it.

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“You know,” I said, looking around. “Whoever decided on this place for the meeting has a sense for the dramatic. I approve.”

We were back at the place where Doomsday had died. The massive hole in the ground was still there, cordoned off from the public, as were the chairs Tsunade had initially summoned for my Family and the heroes. I, who had been sitting on the corpse, didn’t have one, but that didn’t matter. Instead, I had taken Melina’s, and she was sitting on my lap as we courteously gave our hosts time to get into position.

“‘Doomsday Memorial,’” Melina read off a nearby plaque. “’A monster attacked Cleaveland and fought its way west. Defeated by the joint effort of the PRT, Justice League, X-men and the newly arrived Elden Lord. Total casualties: 7509 innocent lives.’”

“Bet you can’t guess which of those set up this thing,” I smirked, not really caring that the PRT was using it for a PR stunt.

I bet there were dozens of these little memorials in this state alone. To this world, it

was just another one of the many villain attacks, if more devastating than most.

"No matter the reason, remembering the fallen is admirable," Artoria declared imperiously. She made an impressive sight, clad in full armour with her spear planted in front of her. Only her helmet was absent as she looked over the grounds of what might again become a battleground. "This area is near their headquarters while remaining far from civilization and civilians. It is a suitable place for parley."

"Yeah," I said sarcastically. "They totally look like they're here to talk."

In all fairness, they didn't look like they brought everyone. The coast guard wasn't here, for example.

Sarcasm aside, there were a lot of heroes here.

The X-men, obviously, but also the Justice League, the Avengers, a few other PRT teams, and some independent heroes. Police had also been called, mostly in the distance, to keep any civilians from approaching.

Did this mean they were prepared for battle? Then why not have it further from civilization? But this was also clearly a force ready to fight, so what was the game plan? Were they trying to intimidate us with numbers?

Three again fifty sounded like long odds until you remembered I was one of those three.

…I suppose Artoria with Avalon and a host of the Phoenix Force were also with me.

When I put it like that, I started feeling bad for the heroes. Maybe we should wait longer so they have time to gather more backup. It was the only way I wouldn't feel like a bully.

Then again, I like being a bully.

I waved at the Flash as he arrived half a minute late, an extra large soda in his hand. He waived back, and we both pretended we didn't see the red visor glaring at me with the force of a laser.

Did this world's Cyclops' power work like a biological laser coming from his eyes or like a portal to another dimension like in the comics? Food for thought.

Melina, Artoria and I were surrounded. There were no two ways about it.

I honestly wasn't worried.

No, I should correct that. I wasn't worried about the potential enemies in front of me.

I was very concerned about what the next play would be. My entire plan this time was a counterattack, and I only had two of my wives with me because this place was not the focus. If nothing happened, that would be my loss.

I just had to force something to happen.

Time to bullshit my way to success.

Just another Tuesday, then.

"Hello, all," I said loudly, my voice enhanced with magic as I waved to get everyone's attention. "We are here because there seems to be some sort of misunderstanding. Shall we get started?"

Everyone had kept their distance until now, but at my prompting, the X-men looked ready to charge over, Cyclops in the lead.

Let's see. There's ol'pink-eye, Wolverine, Colossus, Magik, Nightcrawler, Rogue, Iceman, and Storm. It was a regular all-star lineup, not counting a few who had died during Heartbreak, like Archangel. Professor X was surprisingly not here, which, more than anything, told me they didn't think this would be an actual talk and not a trap.

Superman flew quickly to head off the mutant brigade, whispering a warning to them that I could overhear despite the distance. While he did that, others approached more cautiously but with less belligerence.

"We have to stop meeting like this," I waived at Captain America.

"We do," the Avenger answered with a tight smile. "I trust you've been well."

"Eh," I shrugged dramatically. "Same shit, different day. Been running around putting out fires, you know? Healing this, killing that. I've barely been home these last few weeks, and my wives are ready to kill me if I don't slow down."

To his credit, the former soldier hid his wince at the mention of my 'healing' well. He was trying to maintain a position of solidarity, whether he believed I was guilty or not.

Too bad for him. I was still annoyed at being accused of something I didn't do, and I was going to be a petty little bitch about it.

In the nicest way possible, of course. I was on my best behaviour.

"Where are they, if you don't mind me asking," the Avenger asked as the heroes spread around us. They were not fully encircling but were far enough apart that they wouldn't get in each other's way.

"I figured a peaceful talk would be best for clearing this mess up," I shrugged again, pretending not to notice. "I left them at home so you all wouldn't feel like we are ganging up on you."

Captain America looked like he was going to say something else, but Superman looked to be done cautioning Cyclops, so instead of continuing the pleasantries, he leaned forward to whisper to me.

"I don't think you did it." I raised a brow but didn't say anything. "No matter what happens, I do appreciate your willingness to talk. We all do. None of us want to fight. I hope we can get through this without violence and find the woman and child."

Man, what was with the heroes of this world making me feel like a dick when I

wanted to be a petty asshole? Were they really the good guys and I the bad guy? Is it me? Am I the problem?

…Nah.

Then Captain America was gone, stepping away as the Scott Summers stomped up to stand in front of me.

“Elden Lord.” Man, did he gargle nails, or was he just unhappy to see me?

“Cyclops,” I answered politely with a smile on my face, despite my desire to call him ‘winky-blinky, the one-eyed man.’ “Is this everyone?” I asked, and, to my credit, only a touch of sarcasm was in my voice.

Truly, I was a saint.

“No,” he spat the word. “We are still waiting for someone.”

“I don’t see why we have to,” I said pleasantly. Butter wouldn’t melt in my mouth. “We can get this sorted and go home.”

I could understand where the man was coming from. I really could. If someone kidnapped my wife and kid, I’d be much worse than he was now.

But just because I understood him didn’t mean I would tolerate this. I was being eminently reasonable when the standard comic world response would be to fight and not even try to clear up the issue.

“We are no-” Scott started to say, but Logan grunted and touched his arm. Rather than stopping him from saying something, the Canadian seemed to be indicating something in the sky. Looking up, I saw a new arrival flying down from the clouds.

It took me a moment to place the man; his costume was so similar to Superman’s.

Then it clicked.

This got a bit more complicated.

He landed amongst the heroes, a distance away from me, and there was a palpable hum in the air with his arrival.

I couldn’t allow that.

“Greetings, Guardian,” I said casually to the alien who could tear apart black holes at his full strength. “Or do you prefer Kallark?”

“You know me?” The Strontian asked, his dramatic entrance put off slightly by my casual acceptance of his arrival. “I don’t know you.”

Strictly speaking, Guardian could be a valid threat to me despite his weakness to magic, similar to Superman.

There was just one problem if they wanted to use him to intimidate me.

“Eh,” I shrugged dismissively. “I’ve heard about you. Never bothered to introduce myself. Didn’t see the point, but since you’re here, I’m Mikael.”

Then, completely disregarding the baffled look on the alien's face, I stood up, Melina doing the same. I gave a light stretch, completely ignoring the new arrival.

Stronians get their power from their confidence. Guardian, in his prime state, would be a match for Superman. If I hurt his confidence, he'd be no more of a threat than Cyclops.

I wasn't worried about him. I was concerned about the empire at his back.

Having to wipe out the Shi'ar would be a pain in the ass.

"Now that we are all here," I said with a smile, pretending like the people gathered weren't ready to fight me to the death if it came to it. "Let's start this shindig. Artoria? Be a dear?"

The King of Knights nodded imperiously at my words and stepped away. That got curious looks all around, but nobody stopped her since she didn't seem ready to fight.

"Shine Brilliantly, My Radian Hall: ***Bright Ehangwen!****"*

The hall of King Arthur built itself around us in an instant. White walls decorated with tapestries showing moments of valour. Rows of seats, enough for everyone here, rose from the floor. A dias rose along the far wall, a throne and two accompanying chairs atop it.

Light shown through vast windows, giving the air a sacred look as the heroes looked around the famous hall, some for the second time.

This was a hall for heroes, for those dedicated to the ideals of justice. In this hall, many of the moral guidelines held today were first enshrined and adapted from old Roman laws. Chivalry. Noblesse Oblige.

So much of modern-day heroism could trace its roots to Arthurian legend.

This was not the Round Table, but this was as close as anyone could come without summoning a certain Mashmallow.

Did I appreciate the irony of using this Noble Phantasm twice in the same location for the same people? You be I did.

Did it also serve my purpose of framing my side as the good guys? Yep.

Did I think it was kick ass and wanted a reason to use it since I wasn't inside last time?… Not telling.

"I shall serve as impartial judge and Ruler for this trial," Artoria declared as she sat on the throne and stared down the entire room, Rhongomyniad pulsing with power in her hand. "I invite Superman and Captain America to join me. No matter the verdict, I shall ensure justice is done. I trust my reputation speaks for itself, and there will be no complaints."

You might have the Shi'ar Empire behind you, but I had an Artoria.

My win, bitch.

Author's Note:

Not much to say. I had initially planned to add a bit more, but after 9k words, I still had no natural stopping point, so I dialled back a bit to ensure flow. The first part was supposed to be part of the last chapter, but IRL stuff came up, so it was pushed to this one, meaning I've had to do a bit of restructuring.

Guardian, as one of Marvel's MANY Superman clones, only gets used a little despite his potential in more cerebral-based stories. Punching a planet flat is cool, but making a man who can do that cry and then kick his ass is a lot more fun in my book.

The Amazons get a bit of screen time. More often than not, except in very specific timelines, they are depicted as almost damsels for Wonder Woman to rescue. I didn't want to do that here. They might be down, but they are in no way out.

I hope you are enjoying the story, and I will see you all next week.

PSA: For those needing clarification about Insight/Frenzy/Bloodborne, don't worry. The characters only speak their understanding of it, not necessarily the truth. Just keep in mind: Insight is a high level of consciousness and the ability to see more of the world. Frenzy is madness when you see something you can't process. Having Insight means you see more, putting you at a bigger risk of Frenzy.

The beast plague is a product of blood, not insight. They are separate. One can gain insight by being confronted by Blood's products, because you understand more about the world, but high insight doesn't turn one into a beast. Beasts and Kin are two different classifications in Bloodborne. The former are caused by blood, not the latter. The people in this world are conflating the two since both end in a plague of sorts. One is blood-borne, and the other is mind-borne.

OBSESSION VI

“Obsession is a state in which mind is denied the freedom of seeing things objectively.”
-B.K.S. Iyengar

“What makes a Ruler?

Long had Artoria pondered this question. Had she been a valid rule because she drew Caliburn from the stone? Because she was the heir of Uther? Because she had been strong enough to conquer Britain? Because she had inspired her people with an ideal?

And why had her rule failed?

She was not the King Arthur from Proper Human History. She was the Artoria who had laid down Excalibur to pick up Rhongominyad. She had slight memories of her Saber form, but the clearest memories came from the ‘What if’ of her existence.

What if she had survived Camlann?

What if she lived long enough to lose her humanity and become more goddess than a woman?

What if King Arthur hadn’t died with her kingdom?

In a world where the King of Mages tried to burn away humanity, he would offer such a being a Holy Grail to create one of his singularities. The Lion King would try to preserve the memory of humanity as if they were bugs in a display case. Such a being would not understand them anymore.

Artoria had the memories of such a timeline, but that was not wholly who she was in this summoning. She was that woman, that creature, but she was also the Artoria who picked up the Holy Lance and still died on that hill, returning the Tower to the Reverse Side with her death.

A Servant was not a ghost. It was not the spirit of the fallen that came back to haunt the land.

A Servant was originally a Heroic Spirit. A story. A legend made real. Part of that was the soul of the being the Servant was based on, but a considerable portion was the stories told about that soul.

A man’s legend warped and changed with time, growing more potent with every telling. The more famous, the more significant their impact on history, the greater the Heroic Spirit.

A Servant was a facet of that greater whole, a container made of only a portion of that tale. A story that focuses on only one aspect.

Artoria, the Servant summoned by Mikael to the Island over a year ago, was a mixture of three aspects.

Her Lancer version, an example of a wise and mature leader. The 'What If' of a perfect king.

The Goddess Rhongominyad. A goddess of justice, born from a melding with the Holy Lance, dedicated to an ideal so entirely that nothing human was left.

And a third, much smaller but still significant aspect.

That of a Ruler, an impartial judge with no wishes of her own but a pure desire to abide by and enforce the rules.

That her Ruler aspect came about by her desire to play cards dressed as a bunny was immaterial.

The one unifying trait, the core of this version of 'Artoria Pendragon,' was a dedication to impartial justice.

Usually, she focused much more on her Lancer aspect. It was as close as she could get to being 'human' again.

All three made up who she was.

She had focused on that in her time with the Justice League. Not combat or heroism as many others did, but diplomacy. Negotiation. The establishment of the Rule of Law and the results that followed.

From Rule, Law.

From Law, Justice.

From Justice, Peace.

That was who Artoria was.

When Mikael had approached her with his plan to have her officiate this dispute, she had warned him.

"I will see justice met. No matter the guilty party."

Artoria trusted her husband enough to believe he was innocent. Sir Mikael had her complete confidence. His code of honour was not her own, but he would stoop so low to kidnap a newborn and its mother from their beds.

But a Ruler must be just, and justice does not care if you love someone.

Mikael had given her that smirk of his that always made her chest warm and had told her he expected nothing less and would be disappointed if she compromised her beliefs for him.

Her heart, her mind, and her soul told Artoria her husband was innocent, but she was prepared to set that all aside to once more pick up the mantle of Ruler.

To be impartial. To see justice done.

No matter how much it hurt.

If only others could appreciate her sacrifice.

“This is unacceptable!”

Unsurprisingly, the hero, Cyclops, was the first to voice his disapproval.

“Why?” Her husband asked guilelessly. “I thought you would appreciate it?”

“Because it won’t be fair.” The dark-skinned mutant, Storm, stepped up to her leader’s aid. She didn’t look as angry, but her countenance was chastising. “She is your wife. Even if she tries to be neutral, she will still favour you. And if you are guilty, she will still side with you.”

A part of Artoria was offended. She had promised to be impartial, so she would be. It was as simple as that.

That part of Artoria, the one who wanted to rise to the mutant’s challenge, was squashed mercilessly.

She was not here to answer challenges. She was here to see justice done.

“I have invited others to join me,” she intoned, looking at Superman and Captain America. She had chosen those two partially because she knew each of them, having worked together with them before, but primarily because of their reputations as moral guides in this world.

Captain America might serve the PRT, but he was well known to be a moral guide for the entire organization, acting as a shield that prevented it from going too far in its efforts to control the Super population.

Superman was not only a key figure in the Justice League, he was the poster child for heroes worldwide, not just in America. In fact, the Kryptonian was known to have sided against the US when it tried to overstep its international boundaries thanks to possessing the greatest concentration of Supers in the world.

While Artoria would retain the final verdict, their opinions would be respected and considered before she rendered judgment.

Not that she would need it, her Lancer side thought. She fully expected her husband to convince them of his innocence.

“They didn’t just lose their family,” Cyclops snarled. “Neither did you. You could be involved in the kidnapping, for all we know.”

“It is because they are uninvolved that I asked them to join me,” Artioria intoned, staring at the red visor impassably. “We came here as an act of diplomacy. We will be the arbiters of such. If you cannot agree to such terms, any other terms would also fall on deaf ears. You will accept this ruling unless you wish to cease all efforts to find peace.”

It was the bitter and sad part of justice.

No matter whether you were in the right or wrong, it all needed to be backed by strength.

Justice does not descend from the heavens.

Justice is enforced.

The mutant looked like he would protest some more, but Captain America approached him covertly and whispered in his ear.

“Trust me.”

That was all he said, and Cyclops, looking like he swallowed a lemon, looked at the Kryptonian, who nodded back.

“Fine,” the new father bit out, standing back as the two heroes approached her.

Artoria nodded to them, and they took their positions beside her and looked out over the room of heroes with her.

Clearly, nobody but her Family had expected things to go this way.

Mikael and Melina stood a ways away from everyone else as the heroes started to spread through Ehangwen’s Great Hall.

“Cyclops.” Since she didn’t know who here knew his actual name, she would use his Nom de Guerre. “You have accused Mikael of taking your wife and your newborn son from their beds last night.”

“Because he- They did. Both of them. I saw them.”

Despite his evident rage, Artoria remained unfazed.

“This is not a trial.” She said simply. “This is a diplomatic meeting. I am laying out each side’s position so we may have a firm basis to talk. Guilt, or lack thereof, can be determined later.”

There was some nervous shuffling in the room as the heroes whispered amongst themselves.

“Ah, damn,” Iron Man said loudly enough for the whole room. “And here I was hoping to see him in handcuffs.”

“I’m not the one who where’s the handcuffs,” Mikael joked back with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Artoria was glad she was acting as a Ruler for the moment. It would not do her image as an impartial agent of justice if she were to flush red in embarrassment at the memories her husband’s words brought to mind.

Who knew Diana had such… proclivities?

“Mikael!” Artoria chastised, drawing his attention. She noticed that Cyclops had been about to yell at him. “You will conduct yourself properly, or I will force you to.”

Her husband quirked an eyebrow, a slight smirk on his lips, but he nodded.

They both knew nothing in this world could physically force him to do anything he didn't wish to. He could ignore matter, people, and power entirely. He was as Free as he wanted to be.

Except if she ordered him to do something, revealing his weakness to those he bound to everyone present.

Yet, Artoria hadn't. Her words had been carefully chosen so as not to be an order.

Just as she must be impartial, so must she refrain from leveraging her position or the benefits thereof to fulfill her duties.

That, and she never wanted to partake in the 'training' the others participated in to combat her husband's fear. Artoria never again wanted to be in the position to determine her spouse's fate.

"Yes, dear," Mikael said, a note of sarcasm in his voice but complying with her words.

Artoria narrowed her eyes at the man but turned her attention back to Cyclops.

"You have a reason for the accusation? Speak it and present any proof you have. After, we will hear the other side. Once both sides have established common ground, talks will go from there."

Artoria looked at Superman and Captain America for their input on this format. They nodded, pleased that there was actual discourse rather than the usual banding of accusations.

She had repeatedly heard Diana complain about how often her original Justice League had been forced to fight other heroes because of misunderstandings or heightened emotions.

Cyclops did not look pleased, but with the reassurance of his comrades and encouraging looks from the other heroes, he spat out his story between glares at her husband and fellow wife.

As she listened, Artoria couldn't help but furrow her brows. From the telling, she could understand why the man was so angry and so ready to accusation. From the story alone, it left little in the way of defence. Everything matched what these people would know about her husband, from the powers used to the behaviour. The image he had crafted for the public was being used very well to frame him.

But that was all it was: an image.

None here but her and Melina truly knew Mikael.

They saw the jokes but didn't understand that he never made them at truly inappropriate times, not touching specific topics in the least. He had a sixth sense for his audience.

They saw the multiple wives and thought him lustful, but didn't understand just how

loyal he was or how he fought with Emma about gaining another lover.

They saw how his wives were loyal and backed his actions but didn't understand that they felt no issue voicing disagreements at his efforts if necessary.

Somebody had played the part of 'Mikael' and 'Melina' but only knew of their superficial characteristics.

Even ignoring her feelings, listening to Cyclops's story had Artoria the Ruler ready to end this farce now, declare Mikael, Melina, and Raven innocent, and point out that this was obviously the work of any number of shapeshifters, Masters, or psychics this world had to offer.

But this was not a trial. This was a meeting for diplomatic purposes. This was about more than convincing her of what happened; it was about reaching a settlement. Both parties needed to achieve a balance.

As the tale, the X-men leader shaking in rage, Artoria looked at the heroes, sweeping her eyes over all of them in turn.

"Is anyone or anything able to corroborate this tale." She was confident Scott was certain about what had happened, but she knew there were plenty in this world who could have implanted a false memory, so hard facts would go a long way to verify the truth.

"As Cyclops said," Strange said, stepping forward and waving his hands. An image of the room in question hovered in his hands. "The room was undisturbed. The door was still locked, as were the windows. I did find traces of magic but was unable to recreate the scene. The Elden Lord is known to inhibit such spells."

"Anything else?"

Nobody could provide any other proof or outside views that Cyclops hadn't already mentioned, so Artoria looked to her lover.

"Mikael. Present your argument as well as any proof you have."

All eyes were on her husband, who had remained silent this entire time.

A miracle.

Not that his quirks weren't evident by the fact that he had pulled out a recliner from nowhere and was sitting in it, his legs raised and Melina on his lap. A fake pipe was between his lips, and bubbles escaped it with every breath.

Ever since Cyclops had started his story, his eyes had been on the ceiling, his fingers drumming against the arm of his seat, and his tongue stuck out slightly like he did whenever he was thinking about something.

Melina poked him in the cheek when he said nothing for a second.

Mikael blinked, refocusing on the room and all the eyes on him.

"Sorry," he apologized, pulling the bubble pipe from his mouth and smiling as he put

it away. “Got lost in thought for a moment.”

“Answer the question,” Artoria said sternly. While she appreciated his calm attitude, his antics would not convince the people here of his innocence.

“Obviously, I didn’t do it,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “But we all wouldn’t be here if you didn’t think there was a chance I was guilty.”

“Because you took them!” Fed up with Mikael’s nonchalance, Cyclops raised his hands to the side of his visor and prepared to blast the man. Storm grabbed his hand and shot him a look.

Artoria approved.

No matter whether he believed Mikael guilty or not, attacking someone during a diplomatic meeting was foolish.

“After the convention,” Mikael continued, nodding at Iron Man like he hadn’t been interrupted. “Thanks for the stage, by the way. Anyway, after the convention, I returned home. My Family and I had some things to discuss after Miss Frost’s… bold words, as you can imagine.” There were a few smiles as Mikael joked lightly. “’Happy wife, happy life’ is much more important when you have a dozen wives and you’ll live forever. After dinner, I spent the rest of the night… engaged with a few. While they can and will testify on my behalf, I didn’t think anyone would believe them, so I left them behind before I came today.”

“Who, exactly?” Captain America asked. “And you should have brought them anyway.”

“If you want to hear about my sex life, I’m fine with it,” Mikael shrugged. “But Priscilla is a bit shier. We can see about setting up a meeting later should this end peacefully.”

“We will want to interview her,” Superman nodded. “We will keep it to appropriate subjects.”

“Anyway, as I said, you all think there is at least a chance I took Madelyne Pryor and her son, or so many wouldn’t be here. I’ve spent this entire time trying to think of a way to prove my innocence. The sooner I do that, the sooner we can focus on the most important thing. Finding the victims.”

A few of the heroes shuffled awkwardly.

Artoria understood their discomfort at her husband’s gentle rebuke. Every moment they spent here was a moment they weren’t looking for the kidnapped woman and baby. It was an odd trait she had noticed about this world’s heroes while working with them.

If there was a figure, a villain, they could focus on, they would. They focused more on ‘beating the bad guy’ than fixing the underlying issue that led to the bad guy in the first

place.

There was a reason for this, of course. Most villains tied their plans to their well-being, and stopping them usually led to fixing the problem. And punching a guy out was way easier than solving systematic and cultural issues that led to villains.

It was a trap of a mindset, in her eyes.

Artoria had been shocked that she currently held the record for most diplomatic agreements officiated in the entire Justice League despite only having been on this planet for a few months. While this was partially due to the turbulent nature of these times, it also showed that heroes focused more on disasters and villains rather than the state of the world as a whole.

“I am no super genius,” Mikael shrugged his shoulders. “No Batman or Reed Richards or Tony Stark,” Iron Man visibly preened at the compliment. “I can only think of two things that might help prove my innocence. Sorcerer Supreme, you said you sensed magic in the room? Were you able to determine the spell or type of magic used?”

“No,” Stephen Strange shook his head. “The traces were too faint and fragmented. Whoever did this made it untraceable.”

“That would be my first point.” Mikael’s hands lit up, his right with flames and his left with starlight. The heroes tensed, but he kept them facing toward the ceiling, so they settled down to watch them wearily. “Can anyone sense these spells? Their type, power, or anything at all?”

“No,” Strange said with a frown. “What are they?”

“A simple fireball and glintstone pebble,” Mikael said as he released both spells. A tiny comet blasted toward the ceiling, plinking against it with a clink. The fireball was slightly more impressive but dissipated in contact with Ehangwen’s ceiling.

As if her Hall could be marked by such pitiful spells.

“What about these?”

The heroes recoiled at the visual representation of his power.

His left hand held a lighting bolt, pulsing with yellow power so bright it seared the retina.

He held a miniature sun in his right hand, glowing an angry orange as rings of fire surrounded it.

Two phantasmal heads of a dragon floated above him, each twice his size, as their jaws glowed with waiting Ruin.

A select few heroes, including Strange and Superman, stared in horror at the Blue Moon that rose behind his back.

Clad in the clear regalia of his power, enough to wipe a continent off the planet,

Mikael smiled at the heroes.

“It’s like there’s nothing there,” Magik said, a slight Russian accent in her voice as she stared at him with wide eyes. “Not even an illusion. Just nothing.”

“That is the first thing I can think of to prove my innocence,” Mikael smiled as he dissipated his spells rather than release them. Artoria was confident she and her Hall could withstand them, but the heroes would surely perish in the exchange. “I don’t need to cover my tracks. If I don’t want people to feel my power, they won’t. A trait unique to my Family and me. We would never have left traces behind. Someone trying to frame me would not be able to imitate that, so they did the best they could.”

“You can choose to,” Strange narrowed his eyes, clearly trying to figure out the mechanics of this ability. “I have felt Lady Ranni’s power before from that same spell.”

“Sure, when she was trying to scare you off,” Mikael rolled his eyes. “You know, the last time you all thought I was going to do something malicious? How’d that work out?”

“Mikael,” Artoria warned him, and he held his arms up in mock surrender as the heroes shifted awkwardly at the reminder.

“Anyway, if I was trying to leave a false trail, why would I spend the effort covering my tracks? Just cast a spell you all can sense.”

“You mentioned two theories to prove your innocence,” Superman prompted. “What is the second?”

“Motivation,” her lover deadpanned. “Who. What. When. Where. Why. Four out of five is not enough. Even if I were guilty, which I am not, we still have to answer the ‘Whydunit?’ don’t we? In a world with shapeshifters, psychics and magic, the why is the only concrete question we can focus on. Everything else can be faked. So why would I want the victims, and more importantly, why did I take them then? Why not wait for a better time, when the mother and child were alone? Why did Squinty see anything at all?”

“Because you didn’t think I would shake off your spell,” Scott snarled. “Because you wanted the Phoenix Force.”

“But Melina has the Phoenix Force already,” Mikael pointed out.

“Which you knocked us out to take,” Iron Man pointed out. “You clearly have plans for it.”

“I did nothing,” Mikael said innocently, hand over his heart. “And it wounds me that you would think so. Neither did my wives. Instead, you should be thanking us. We stopped the real person trying to become the Phoenix Host. Odin.”

There were confused glances traded around the room as the heroes, particularly those not knowing about the Phoenix incident, wondered what Sir Mikael was talking about.

“Were you aware why the Phoenix Force, why I, came to earth in the first place?”

Melina asked the room, speaking for the first time. Her left eye glowed with fire as her red hair danced like a flame. “It was to become one with Life, with Mikael.” Mikael waved at the room, an awkward smile on his face. “Your efforts would not have stopped me. I was aware of the ritual you were attempting and its inevitable failure. Should it have become a hindrance, I would have burned you all from existence.”

Strange looked put out but remained quiet as the Phoenix Host continued to speak.

Artoria kept her focus on Guardian. He was the unexpected twist in their plans today, and he had not taken his gaze from the kindling maiden since this meeting had started.

That had changed when she mentioned the goal was Mikael, and now he was focused on her husband with a laser-like intensity.

She didn’t know his details, seeing as Mikael hadn’t briefed them on his abilities, but he had to be powerful based on her husband’s initial reaction to him.

Though why he immediately disregarded the alien while also being on guard was odd to her.

“I ignored you because you are irrelevant,” the Phoenix continued, and Mikael whispered a low ‘harsh’ at the words. “Odin incapacitated you and begged me to join him to heal Thor. He promised to aid me in becoming one with Life. Melina, I, provided a better offer. We left. Not one action taken against any of you.”

“Point Break is hurt?” Iron Man asked, worried over his friend. “When? How?”

“No idea,” Mikael shrugged. “We’ve been looking for a way to reach Asgard for a while to talk to ol’one-eye but haven’t found one. Does anyone have a Bifrost we can rent? I promise to bring it back in pristine condition.”

There was a clamour of noise. Thor was well-regarded by almost the entire hero community. The old thunder god wasn’t without his issues, but his bombastic attitude and willingness to aid pretty much anyone was always a pleasure to those who knew him well.

Artoria was the arbiter, however, and needed to drag the topic back to why they were here.

“Aiding the Asgardians can be discussed at a later day,” she intoned. “As can the details of what truly occurred that led to Melina becoming the host of the Phoenix. We are here for a more pressing issue. Mikael has presented a quandary. Can anyone provide a motivation that might be attributed to him for the act you accuse him of?”

There was a beat of silence, as people exchanged looks. Some still looked unconvinced, but the vast majority were giving the matter serious thought.

These were not a rabid crowd of civilians. They were heroes, and a large part of their job was thinking critically to determine right from wrong.

Could the Elden Lord be guilty of the crime? Certainly. He’d remain a suspect until

the truth was discovered just because he had the power to do the deed.

Was there enough doubt to justify a peaceful resolution now? Yes. Mikael had cast enough doubt that many heroes wouldn't feel comfortable attacking them outright as they might have done when they first met.

Cyclops looked like he knew the public perception had shifted. He was looking around the room, fists clenched. Even his fellow X-men shot their leader apologetic looks. They were more invested than the other heroes, but they also didn't want to attack a possibly innocent man.

And that was what this meeting was truly about.

It was to determine whether violence between the X-men and their allies was to break out against Mikael and his Family. If it was, they brought the muscle they could gather. If it wasn't, everyone present would be up to date on the facts and ready to begin the search in earnest.

"As nobody is able to answer the question, and we have heard both sides, we shall now proceed to discuss what actions are to follow," Artoria intoned seriously. "Irrespective of any further arguments, the priority must be on recovering the woman and child. I trust this is not up for debate?"

"Rescuing them is our first and only goal," Superman said, looking at Mikael. "If you don't have them, we must find them."

"I trust we can work together now?" Mikael asked, looking around the room. Apart from Cyclops, who still looked angry, many nodded or voiced their agreement. The Flash even gave a thumbs-up. "Good. Then I can tell you all about my theory."

All the attention focused on him as he held out his hand. An illusion appeared in front of him. A red-haired, green-eyed woman in an X-men suit.

Cyclops choked.

"This is Jean Grey," Mikael said, gesturing to the illusion. "And this is Madelyne Pryor." Another woman appeared beside the first illusion, looking almost entirely identical. "A failed clone of Jean Grey."

"What?!" Scott Summers asked, his voice a shocked whisper.

"It's no secret I've travelled the multiverse," Mikael shrugged. "This knowledge comes from a parallel universe, so do not take it as gospel truth as things are always different, universe to universe. However, in that universe, Madelyne Pryor was an attempt to clone Jean Grey, powers and all. It was a failure, and the clone never attained true life. Until Grey died and the Phoenix left Earth. As it did, it gave a spark of life to the clone, allowing it to live. That is the same in this universe, correct?"

"It is," Melina nodded. "I felt a fragment of my former host and chose to give it a

spark in her memory."

"Here is where things become unverifiable for the moment, but likely," Mikael looked around the room. "The man who cloned her, Nathaniel Essex, placed her in Cyclops' path, hoping they would fall in love and marry. He is a geneticist and believes their child would be an extremely powerful mutant. Tell me, Cyclops, why did you name the boy Nathan?"

"Maddy…" Scott sounded completely unbelieving. No, he didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to believe his marriage was based on lies. "Maddy said it was her dead father's name. That doesn't prove anything!"

Artoria noticed Superman place a hand to his ear, an almost invisible speaker speaking to him as the Kryptonian's face fell.

"I don't think Pryor is conscious of this fact," Mikael said, some sympathy in his voice. "She is being manipulated unconsciously in ways that favour Essex. In that other timeline, he was correct. Your son goes on to become Cable, an incredibly powerful mutant."

"You think this Essex took the woman and child and is trying to frame you?" Strange asked, rubbing at his goatee.

"Is this the same Nathaniel Essex that built Essex Corp?" Iron Man asked. "I've met him at last year's gala. We talked about Supers. How some powers are inherited, and others aren't. That's all I know about him."

"That's the guy," Mikael nodded. "He also goes by Mister Sinister." A few heroes snorted at the name, but Artoria didn't know why they laughed. 'Ice-man' was not the most creative Nom de Guerre either. "My current theory is that he discovered the Phoenix returned to Earth, retrieved his clone and the child for experimentation, and set you all against us. He probably hoped we'd fight and Melina would die or become the Dark Phoenix. Then, he could use Pryor to become the new host while he keeps the child for his studies. My Family is looking for him, but he is not at his registered address, company, or anywhere else we can find, which is suspicious."

"So we're supposed to take your word on all this?" Cyclops denied. "We're supposed to believe some random guy is the mastermind and that none of what I saw was true?"

"Look," Mikael let out a sigh. "I get it, you're mad. I would be, too. But think, man, think! Why wouldn't I have killed you or taken you as well? Why were you able to see anything in the first place when I can make things invisible? Why was it that the only word you could understand was Phoenix? I can speak literally every language. Ever. Of all time. Why would I use the English word if I was already speaking a different language? Almost every civilization in this universe has a word for it because of the Phoenix Force."

To demonstrate, Mikael listed over thirty different ways of saying the name. From human tongues worldwide, which even Storm corroborated were correct, to some words

that were clearly invented and spoken with non-human biology.

"We have been set against each other," Melina said softly, standing from Mikael's lap to look at Cyclops even as he continued increasingly incoherently saying, 'Phoenix.' Artoria was sure he was just having fun now. "I can hear your thoughts. You know this to be true."

The X-men looked like he was vacillating, looking from the Phoenix Host to her husband, fist clenched.

Then he sagged, the fight leaving him.

"I just want my family back," he said in a broken whisper.

"We'll help you find them," Mikael said with a smile, standing and putting away his recliner as he finally stopped his recital.

"Then settlement has been reached," Artoria asked the room. "Everyone will exhaust their best efforts to find the woman and child. Whether Sinister is behind this plot or not, we will work together without conflict until more information is discovered. This is my judgement. Superman?" The alien nodded his head in agreement, still focusing on his earpiece. "Captain America?"

"That is for the best," the first Avenger also agreed. "I would also volunteer my help searching for a way into Asgard. If Thor is injured, we may be able to help."

"Then let us disperse so we may find the victims," Artoria stood from her throne, dispensing her mantle of Ruler.

It was like a weight had been lifted.

While other Rulers considered it but a class one could be assigned, Artoria took the duty seriously when it was entrusted to her.

Now that she didn't have to worry about it, she allowed herself to feel all the emotions she had suppressed.

That had gone both better and worse than they had hoped.

Artoria hadn't dismissed Ehangwen yet; her husband still had a plan.

Instead, she surveilled the room. While many of the heroes were conferring, especially about Thor, Essex, or where and how they'd search for the kidnapped victims, a few stood out to her.

Guardian was approaching Melina, pulling her to the side for questioning.

The X-men huddled together, supporting their leader and discussing where to go from here. Artoria noticed Magik pause mid-speech as every X-men got a vacant look in their eyes, which was expected when speaking telepathically. They were probably talking with Xavier.

It was Superman, however, that drew her attention.

“Mikael,” Superman said lowly, hand still at his earpiece as her husband looked at the man. “Essex Corp. In the other world, were there any side effects to their medicine?”

“What medicine,” her husband asked. “You’re going to need to be more specific. In the other world, the company was a front, sure, but it also operated without issue for years. Just because they made something doesn’t mean it’s bad, though it’s definitely worth a second look. I also know dozens of ‘medicines’ that were actually some sort of biological attack. Do you have a name? Extremis? Miraclo? Xperience? The techno-virus? What specifically is it?”

Superman frowned as he listened to the voice on his communication device.

“Batman says it is called Sanguine? Made to replicate Elixir’s power. A mutant that passed a few years ago.”

“I know of Elixir the mutant, but the name doesn’t ring a bell. Ominous as fuck, though. Definitely sketchy. My family recently raided their offices. We haven’t gone through the data yet, but once we do, we will give you guys anything we find-“

Mikael’s words were cut off by a blast of red energy from a furious and snarling Cyclops.

At the exact moment, Emma’s voice resounded through Artoria’s head.

‘I found Pryor.’

Even as the X-men attacked, Artoria smiled.

Looks like the plan went off perfectly.

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While Amy and Victoria’s first instinct had been to retreat as the building collapsed, the Amazons had done the opposite.

If there was any proof of their relation, it was that Donna, Diana, and Hippolyta had all lunged at a different vine, swords drawn to try and hack the plants to pieces.

Their swords bit deep and would have severed the entire trunks had the thorns not jettisoned themselves like bullets to try and pelt the attackers with needle-sharp precision. All three women were forced to abort their attack to protect their eyes, yet the plants still drew blood as the small projectiles pierced the barest layer of skin.

With an experienced eye, Amy noted that the thorns were strong enough to pierce Amazonian skin but not muscle. None of them were significantly hurt.

Penelope, in contrast to all of them, had a different priority. When the very first vine emerged, she dove for the table, grabbing the book and wrapping it in her arms to defend it. She took more damage than the other Amazons by virtue of not wearing armour and

focusing more on the book than herself.

It happened in a split second, from the vines' initial appearance, the counter, to the counter's counter, to the house collapse.

"God damn it, Vicky!" Amy shouted as she took to the air to escape the grasping vines as they tore the building apart. Three were enough to destroy the newly built edifice, each at least five times her width, covered in thorns and sharp enough to pierce stone.

"What?" Her sister yelled back.

"What did you do?"

"Why do you think I did anything?" Glory Girl cried in her defence.

"Pattern recognition."

"Gah." Amy felt supremely smug about the way her sister faltered in the air at her rebuttal.

Despite the unprovoked attack, Amy wasn't worried. Even ignoring her new Kryptonite biology and the fact that she had spent considerable time and effort giving her sister the same, whoever was doing this had attacked an Amazonian village with Wonder Woman there.

And boy, did the Amazons look pissed.

The alarm sounded, great horns calling all the guards back to defend their new home as more vines, trees, and even the grass rose to try and kill the Amazons and their guests.

Amy fired lasers from her eyes, their power nowhere near the strength of Superman's or even Supergirl's as she had absorbed less sun rays, but they were enough to burn away a few smaller plants reaching for Penelope, who remained curled around the book.

In the opening, Vicky flew down, picking the priestess up by her robe and pulling her into the relative safety in the sky.

The priestess hadn't been cowering or defenceless as she might have looked. As Glory Girl brought her closer, Amy could hear her chanting a spell.

The air shimmered, a great dome coming into existence for the briefest of moments as the air superheated.

The grass, sharpened into blades, and the leaves, tearing through the air like sickles, ignited in flames as the Amazonian called upon Hestia's Hearth to burn away the intruders.

The vines, roots, and trees survived. Scorched black, they remained whole despite the conflagration as they continued their assault on the women of New Themyscira.

"My thanks for your aid," Penelope said as the spell finished its work. She was flipping through the book rapidly. "I could not allow Lord Mikael's work to be destroyed. Ah!" The priestess' eyes suddenly lit up, and a smile filled her face as she continued to flip

through the book. “He ‘wood’ not wish it so.”

Amy and Vicky shared a worried look. Had the woman hit her head?

Amy touched the Amazon, only to find her in perfect health.

“What are you looking for?” Glory Girl asked the priestess as the Amazons fully took up arms, shearing through the grasping plants with the ease of a thresher.

“’Trees and the Many Ways Nature Wants YOU Dead. Yes, YOU specifically.’” The two sisters shared another worried look, and Amy checked again for a head injury. “Lord Mikael dedicated a section of his work to the dangerous flora of this land. I do not remember any that can cause spontaneous growth, but I may have missed something.”

“You did not,” Wonder Woman said, flying up to the trio. “This is not the work of the land itself but of an interloper. Look beyond the mountains to the north.”

Amy did so, squinting her eyes. It took her a minute to understand what she saw, initially thinking it was simply a wooded mountain.

Then she realized that none of the mountains she had seen since arriving had been wooded.

And mountains didn’t move.

“Di?” Victoria asked wide-eyed. “What am I looking at?”

“A plant elemental,” Diana sighed. “THE plant elemental. Swamp Thing. My counterpart told me he had invaded this land but had kept to himself. I know not why he attacks now, after over a month, and why here, but if we are to preserve this valley, he must be stopped.”

“Ok,” Glory Girl said, psyching herself up. “How do we do that? You fought this guy before, right? Threw him in the birdcage? How’d you do it last time?”

“With great difficulty,” Wonder Woman grimaced. “Killing him is impossible. Even if his body is rendered to ash, he will simply regrow from the nearby plants. Last time, the entire league fought him, and we only stopped him by magically lulling him into a spiritual slumber.”

“This time will be even more difficult,” Penelope said grimly, book open in her hands. “He has gained the aid of the flora of this land. I see Miranda Blooms. They can spew poison, Rot, and cast magic. The ents are little more than walking trees in comparison, but the greatest threat is that main body.”

“Not the army of plant creatures marching towards us?” Amy asked sarcastically. It was surreal to see an entire horizon of green move towards you in a tide. The vines had been chump change, a distraction so the Amazons wouldn’t notice the army at their doorstep for as long as possible. Which didn’t need to be long since the wave of plants was approaching at startling speed. “Good to know. I thought this would be boring.”

“Tomb Mould, Lumenflowers, Coldblood Flowers, Fulgurblooms, Poisonblooms, Green Blossoms, Arteria Leaf, Bloodrose,” Penelope listed off plant after plant she noticed, her face growing graver with every second. “Simply being that things present for long will be deadly. It will be immune to poison and the usual herbicide-type spells. Fire, lightning, cold. None of those will work. It will reconnect everything as soon as it is severed. And…” Penelope had looked grim but determined until she saw the ‘head’ of the massive creature. She breathed out the word in awe and terror. “Scarlet Aeonia.”

“Like…” Wonder Woman asked, staring at the red flower head with wariness.

“From Lord Mikael’s memory,” Penelope nodded. “The remnants of a god’s descent.”

“We shall evacuate,” Diana ordered at once. “Glory Girl, open the portal. We shall return to the US.”

“We will not!” Hippolyta ordered as she approached the group, every Amazon behind her.

Amy got a look at the remains of the village. Every building had been destroyed, but not a single life had been lost that she could see. Every plant had been torn to shreds, burned or turned to mush, unable to regrow.

“Mother!” Wonder Woman protested, but it was Donna who explained the order to her older sister.

“The patrols,” the young woman said simply, staring at the army of trees. “We cannot leave till they return.”

“Do not forget, behind us is Lord Mikael’s home. I will not allow our hosts to be surprised by a foe because we fled instead of defending our new home,” Hippolyta said, raising her sword.

“They can take care of themselves,” Diana protested.

“And so can we.”

“Shit!” Glory Girl swore, letting go of Penelope, who started flying under her own power. “I got an idea. Hold that thing off for like five minutes!”

Then she was gone, flying south as fast as she could.

Amy facepalmed.

So much for leaving once the guards got back.

“Five minutes?” Hippolyta smirked. “Penelope! Raise the wards to full power! We have five minutes to kill this thing. Let’s show these girls what it means to be Amazons!”

Their war cry shook the mountain.

Author's Note:

To be honest, I have to apologize for the double cliffhanger. Once again, IRL matters seriously delayed me, and I could only finish this chapter late tonight, so it is slightly shorter than usual. This means I only had time for one round of editing, so I also apologize for this chapter's rougher nature. Come hell or high water, Obsession 7 will end this arc.

I am somewhat surprised nobody guessed, or if they did, they didn't mention how absolutely, pants shittingly terrifying a plant elemental would be with access to the flora of the Soulsborne games. Hell, just give Poison Ivy the green blossoms from Dark Souls and Rowa from Elding Ring, and she becomes something Superman would have trouble killing without wiping out cities. Infinite stamina and infinite healing. When you get the really exotic and powerful stuff, like Miranda Flowers or the Bolusus and Grease? Sure, crafting in Elden Ring is underutilized, but the sheer absurdity of it is mind-boggling without game limitations.

I am disappointed I didn't have time for the X-men fight, and Guardian fell by the wayside for the chapter. I tried to show how I think diplomacy would work in this sort of situation. I don't think the heroes are stupid, not even Scott Summers (though, like many people, I am not a fan of the character). I tried to show both sides where he was coming from and that he was not wholly lost in his rage.

Anyway, I won't delay the release of this chapter any longer with my thoughts, and I will see you all next week for the finale of Obsession.

OBSESSION VII

“There is a point at which curiosity becomes unbearable, when it becomes an obsession, like hunger.”
-Mary Roberts Rinehart

“The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

To the being that was once Alec Holland, nothing else mattered but the Green.

Swamp Thing.

That is what they called the animated corpse. For a while, years, it lived as Alec would have.

But the Green called.

And it answered, becoming Swamp Thing in truth, as in name.

It felt the world dying.

An insidious force clawing its way back to strength and power.

Out of reach, always out of reach. Beyond the Green, the Red, or anything at all. Except for the Metal, but by then, it was too late.

It seeped into this world, a tiny corrupted seed that had sprouted into a tree that invaded all. One that would suck the Earth dry for its goals.

Swamp Thing felt the Clear shatter.

Not subverted. Destroyed. Fragments of fragments tossed to the waves.

The first to fall had been the Divided. A Parliament so new, so intertwined with the Green and the Grey that it had no need for an Avatar of its own. It had been vulnerable. Now, it served the Enemy.

The Metal had been next. Theirs had been a subversion born of arrogance. They alone had possessed the means to reach the Enemy, and they alone had sent their champion.

But Avatars were conduits. As they represented their Force on Earth, so to were they keys to access their Kingdoms.

The Rithm joined the Divided.

For years, the Parliaments waged war against each other, fighting to reclaim what was lost or halt the Enemy’s advance. All was nearly lost. Only the Black’s masterful trickery,

turning an enemy agent into their Avatar, had saved the remaining Parliaments.

The Black Avatar destroyed the conduit of the Rithm and claimed the Avatar of the Grey for the Black before the Enemy could gain another foothold.

And then… nothing.

The Enemy stopped its advance. Paused its efforts. The War was not won or lost. It was a cease-fire. One where nothing could be done as the Enemy gathered its forces.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

Swamp Thing waited for war. Biding his strength. Laying his roots deep, deep into the Melt. War would come again.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

Then something changed.

An arrival from beyond the stars.

But this one was different. It did not fall to the Enemy as so many others had. It carried a land with it. A land free of taint. The Parliament of Limbs spoke of creatures and Life protected within the Jewel.

And the Clear started to float back together.

It was an Arc.

A vessel to carry the Green, the Grey, the Black, the White, the Red, the Haze, the Melt, and the still healing Clear beyond the stars. Beyond the Enemy's grasp.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

With the Avatar of the Black, Swamp Thing journeyed to this Arc, this Island. They separated. Her to destroy the Enemy's agents. He to build a home for the Parliaments.

Both failed.

Her, to the natives of this land.

He, because this land rejected the Green.

Over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over, Swamp Thing spread his seeds to the wind.

Dispersing himself only to rebuild. From his death, more Green would sprout. The Island rejected the Parliaments of Trees, of Limbs, of Stone, of Vapors, of Decay, and of Flames.

But it accepted him.

He built himself from this land's plants, from this Green that was not of The Green. He converted it, dispersed it, and rebuilt himself anew.

Like pollen spread to the wind, The Green covered this land.

But it could not become OF this land.

This land was wild. Deadly. It was nature at its most dangerous, untamed and wild. Free.

As he tried to influence this land, it influenced him.

The Rot flowed into him, through him, like tainted sap. It weakened and strengthened him. Making him of this land as he drowned in a lake of Rot and rebuilt himself from tainted leaves. But it was undirected and could not corrupt the will of the Avatar of Green.

It was the Blood which finally changed him. Made him more. Made him aware.

This land was not land.

This Island was no Island.

It was a graveyard.

Built on innumerable corpses of the same man.

Over and over and over and over and over and over, one man had thrown himself against the walls of worlds, splattering himself against them helplessly until they broke or he did.

The worlds broke first.

He carried the marks of those worlds with him in his soul as he found himself trapped once again.

A journey of fire, blood, and ash.

And when the end came, when it was time to reap the harvest, he turned from his prize.

Instead, he obsessed himself with this Island, this soul.

A gravestone of worlds.

A monument to a fool's journey. A story that would never reach its end.

The Blood told this.

This cruelly beautiful world rained blood.

From the beasts that fought and died, pitting themselves against each other and casting their bodies to the hungry ground.

From the ground, glutinously devouring the dead, feasting on the blood and feeding it grasping roots.

From the plants that grew from the red rain, beautifully deadly and poisonously tempting to the beasts.

From the White Mountains and the Pale Moon, who watched the bloody cycle.

The Blood whispered it all to him as his roots joined the others, greedily sucking up the Life and all it contained.

But Swamp Thing was of the Green.

He always remembered his mission.

As Rot twisted his form.

As roots drank Blood.

He never forgot.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

Even as this soul tried to drown him in Life and Freedom, he held on to the chains that tied him to the Parliaments.

Over and over and over and over and over and over he cast out to this land, seeking a home, an Ark for the Earth and all the Life it contained.

Not this soul's Life, Free and deadly as it was.

Life of the planet that had nurtured him.

So that some portion would not be consumed by the Enemy in its eternal war of oppression and domination.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

This land did not care.

One more world among many.

Another tombstone in the graveyard.

Its apathy was Swamp Thing's one boon.

It did not care. His efforts were his own. Their consequences were his own. If he perished, that was the result of himself. If he flourished, it was by his own hands.

In this bloody land, this soul, Freedom and Life were paramount, and neither cared to impede him.

He was Free to Live or Die.

As his seeds, seeds of The Green, spread to the wind, he saw it all.

From the tiniest blade of grass to the mightiest tree, Swamp Thing saw it all.

Swamp Thing could only control himself, but he could be everywhere. He burrowed into the ents, snaking under bark and making them one with him. Like a mangrove, he spread his roots wide and grew. And grew. And grew.

It was not for power.

It was to become one with this land.

It tried to assimilate him.

He tried to assimilate it.

It wanted him to be Free.

He wanted it to be of The Green.

It could not force Freedom.

He could not subjugate what was Free.

And so, the silent battle between the Avatar of the Green, the last hope of the Parliaments of Earth, and the world in Mikael's soul raged in an unending stalemate.

One side could wait. It had seen worlds fall. It was absolute.

The other could not. It had the patience, but not the time.

The Oppressor had moved, and Swamp Thing responded by doubling, tripling his efforts.

It had no effect.

Something had to give. Some new tactic. Some new opportunity.

The Green must survive.

Life must continue.

The opportunity came.

One that belonged to this land. A void to every sense but the most basic had come to this land. It would not have mattered to Swamp Thing, had it not been for one single fact.

Unlike the other voids in the tapestry, the dragons in the shape of women, this one was familiar.

The Parliament of Limbs remembered this one.

This 'Victoria Dallon.'

And so did the Parliament of Bones.

She was of the Earth, of the Parliaments.

She was of this Island, connected to Life and Freedom.

She would be the bridge. She would be the tether to bring the Parliaments to this Arc.

And she was accompanied by agents of the Oppressor.

Opportunity. Danger.

A gamble.

A choice.

As the Green marshalled, as Swamp Thing built himself one final time of all the strongest he could gather, he Saw with his Thousand Eyes the Island relish in choice.

In his Freedom, in his Life.

The Parliaments will survive.

Earth shall continue.

******

The plan was simple.

I was ninety-nine percent sure Mister Sinister was behind this entire debacle, either on his own or working for this 'Oppressor.' But we couldn't find him, so we needed to lure him out. His goal was either Pryor, baby-Cable, or the Phoenix Force.

No matter which it was, or if it was some shadowy third party, none of them wanted my Family and I to work with the heroes. They had invested too much into pitting us against each other for that.

When your enemy doesn't want you to do something, you do it.

By being reasonable, understanding, and defending myself with logic and facts, I would turn enemies into friends, and we'd turn our righteous fury on the true culprits.

The power of friendship shall win the day!

Or at least, that is what the enemy would think.

While a big part of the plan was to make peace with the X-men and their allies, that wouldn't actually find Pryor, Sinister, or whoever was behind it. If peace came from this meeting, it would be productive but ultimately a failure.

We'd still have nothing to go on in finding the kidnap victims and, as tension mounted with every day that passed, even my charming smile would fail in the face of desperation.

But the enemy didn't want a peaceful search either. Whoever did this was clever. They wouldn't overlook that some fool hero could get lucky and stumble on a clue. It happened often enough that they would want us distracted from fighting each other. Especially if Melina had been their real target all along.

They would not allow peace.

So, after I cast enough doubt around to get the heroes at least a little on my side, they had to do something. They probably had a contingency in place for such an occasion if they were as intelligent as I suspected.

Emma can't find them?

Have them wave a neon sign in front of her.

When I heard Emma's voice, I knew I had won.

Cyclops' eye blast? That was just icing on the cake.

I let myself be blasted against the walls of Artoria's hall, already fully healed by the time I hit it.

Unlimited power plus healing miracles equals OP. Plz, no nerf.

The question was, what now?

I didn't need to do anything. My wives were taking care of it. I could just lay here, be a potato, and do nothing. Wait for my name to be cleared.

Guardian changed things though.

Sinister was yesterday's news. The Shi'ar were a much bigger problem.

How to do this?

"What are you doing?" Superman asked, flying to interpose himself between me and Scott and the X-men.

"Maddie-Jean," Scott snarled, struggling to escape from the Kryptonian. "She called us. She escaped his island. He did it. He took them. He still has Nathan! Give me back my son!"

The rest of the X-men had started to spread out, and some heroes had interposed themselves between them and me, though they were shooting me and Melina suspicious looks.

I couldn't help it.

I laughed.

So that was how they were going to play it? I can work with this.

I always thought I could play the heel.

"Artoria," I said casually, sitting up, completely intact. I was still chuckling as I brushed imaginary dirt off myself. "Would you be a dear and start the trial?"

"*Halls of White Justice*," Artoria intoned solemnly, radiating a golden light.

Heroes flinched, and they tried to stop whatever she was doing.

Only to find they couldn't move.

Superman, Captain America, Gladiator, Iron Man, the X-men, the PRT heroes, the other League members, and Melina found themselves completely unable to move as if their bodies were no longer theirs.

"Mine is the Divine Right of Rule."

The entire building glowed in a pure white light as Artoria sat upon her throne once more.

The only reason I could move was because I was Free. Otherwise, even I would be bound by this place. My own power forcing my compliance.

We, who had acknowledged Artoria Pendragon as someone who had a right to judge us, could not oppose her will within the hall of justice.

"Chivalry demands justice. Let the Trial begin."

In FGO, Ehangwen was almost treated as a joke.

A mobile fortress turned into a boat, which was used to fire Rhongomyniad as the Noble Phantasm.

That wasn't what this Hall truly was.

It wasn't a Noble Phantasm based on defence, though it could act like one if she needed it. Artoria already had something like that. She, too, could summon Camelot if she

were ever summoned as a Caster or Shielder class, so tied was she to that place.

This was not the Noble Phantasm of Caster, a Lancer, or a Shielder.

This was the Noble Phantasm, the crystallization of a legend, of a Ruler.

"Hall of the Once and Future King: Bright Ehangwen."

Boy, had I been surprised when she told me the actual ability of her summer NP.

To think, I whaled just for the bunny suit.

I felt cheated.

Give me an actual Ruler FGO! You moral cowards!

"It was a trap," Cyclops snarled.

One of many voices rising in protest.

"What is this, Mikael?" Superman, at least, was kind enough to ask.

"Relax," I chortled. "This isn't a trap. Just insurance in case any of you heroes got… excited. I'm sure you have a bunch of backups on the way. They won't be able to enter until the Trial ends, so sit back and watch the show."

"You have come before my court." Artoria declared, silencing the room as gold-green eyes stared impassively at Cyclops. "You have acknowledged my right to judge, yet you have breached the code of chivalry."

Cyclops tried to say something, but no words escaped. Artoria didn't allow them to.

The King was speaking, and the court must listen.

"You had a chance to prove your case," King Arthur offered in a voice of steely resolve. "When you failed, you attacked the defendant. By right as Ruler and judge, I sentence you. Before these witnesses, before this throne, before your own conscience. I sentence you."

The King's words slammed into the hero like arrows piercing his heart. He flinched, still held in place as his face contorted in a rictus of pain.

I honestly felt a bit bad for the guy.

He was a schmuck, sure, but he was trying to get his wife and kid back. Couldn't blame him for that.

It's too bad for him; I couldn't allow Artoria to finish him off.

"Your majesty," I said, stepping forward with a smile.

Gold-green eyes turned to me, staring at me with a blank intensity.

Yikes.

I was Free from Ehangwen's control, the only one in the room who could move and speak, but if I actively tried to stop Artoria, to undermine her Rule, she'd try and stop me. She had told me as much.

When she was a Ruler, she was impartial.

I had no plans of stopping her Trial. Just altering the punishment a bit.

"As the wronged party," I continued, unfazed by the King's look. "I have the right to weigh in on his punishment."

"Speak."

"Trial by combat," I said easily, not minding her brusk manner. My eyes flicked to Guardian, visibly trying to move without success. "He and his people believe I took his wife and child. Let him fight for them. He and his team."

"That is not justice."

"Justice will be met when I win," I said with a taunting smirk. "I shall stand alone and prove my innocence through combat."

Artoria did not say anything, staring into my eyes.

They were not the eyes of my wife.

They were the eyes of a king, judging not only my words and actions but the future and whether it would be best for her 'kingdom.'

That was the crux of this Noble Phantasm.

It did not empower Artoria in any direct way. Instead, it gave her the 'Right to Rule.'

Those who came to her for judgement became her kingdom. When they had agreed to let her arbitrate, everyone here had unknowingly become her subjects. A type of Geas. It was their own power turned against themselves, their souls.

As King, she had the right to decide who was guilty or innocent, but only as long as it conformed to 'justice.'

Cyclops had broken the rights of hospitality right in front of her when he attacked me, who was here under the flag of truce. She had seen his guilt and could sentence him as she liked.

The kidnapping case? She couldn't judge completely. Both sides of our argument had been based on circumstantial reasoning and hearsay. I thought mine had more logic to it. Scott believed his account was more reliable.

I was petitioning to wrap both 'trials' up at once. Cyclops' sentence' would be carried out because I was the one to choose the punishment and it would settle the original issue.

My solution would be the best for her 'kingdom,' consisting of everyone here.

"Clear the hall," Artoria ordered, and everybody moved.

The King spoke, so it became so.

Within seconds, only the X-men and I were in the hall's center; everyone else, Melina included, was along the walls.

I gave my maiden a quick grin. She had known the original plan, but this deviation was unexpected.

I could see how much she wanted to facepalm as she rolled her eyes at me.

“Before these witnesses. Before this throne. On my name and my Hall,” Artoria looked around the room before focusing on the X-men and meeting every one of their eyes. “Justice will be done.”

And that was it.

They were free.

I could see the moment they could control their bodies again as they all stumbled and shifted from the sudden freedom. They eyed me warily, wondering what I was up to.

Artoria watched it all, not interfering.

I smiled and crossed my hands behind my back.

If I had known this would happen, I would have worn a priest’s outfit, but you work with what you got.

“Rejoice,” I told the X-men, giving them my most winning smile. “Your wish has been granted. I am here. No one will interfere. You think I have your son? Try and take him back.”

The laser missed me by half an inch as I tilted my head.

“You know,” I said conversationally, as Nightcrawler appeared behind me in a ‘BANF’ of displaced air. I ducked under a spin kick as he ‘BANF’ed away again, letting Wolverine come in, claws extended. “Do you all actually think I did it? Or do you just need someone to blame?”

“You don’t mess with a man’s family, bub,” Wolverine grunted as he slashed and slashed at me.

I weaved, ducked and twisted away from the man’s weapons. It wasn’t that the short Canadian wasn’t good. He was. I was just better.

I might not have ‘super speed’ but I was still faster than him.

The air shifted again, and I ducked another one of Nightcrawler’s attacks. He had another trick this time, though, and Rogue fell on top of me. I stepped aside, but she twisted, arms reaching to grab me.

I let her.

Her ungloved hand touched my face as I smiled down at her.

Her eyes widened as nothing happened.

I couldn’t resist.

I headbutted her.

The heroine stumbled back, blinking in pain.

Colossus took her place, trying to grab me with his steel hands and hold me down for the others.

I jumped, flipping lightly and landing on his shoulder, only to slip down his back to place him between me and Magik. The beam of… some sort of energy hit the mutant and refracted harmlessly off his shiny form.

Did she have magic that didn't have friendly fire? Or was it just not effective on metal? Either way, I was impressed.

A ranged character shooting into melee must consider these things, or they'd roll with disadvantage.

Whoops, it looks like the wizards were going to cast more spells. What sort of BBEG would I be if I didn't act appropriately dramatic?

But how to go about it?

Decisions, decisions.

A localized cloud hovered over our heads, and rain started to fall as Storm created her own weather within Ehangwen. Wind picked up, not targeting me but the X-men as it blew them away. With the area clear of everyone but me, the lightning fell.

Bolts of super hot electricity fell on and around me, the sound as deafening as the light was blinding.

I couldn't dodge in time.

My skin chard. My nerves lit up with pain. My eyes boiled in their sockets.

I smiled as the glacier formed around me, meter-thick ice growing in an instant as the water from the rain gave it a boost. Iceman kept up, growing my glacial prison thicker and thicker.

'Immortal Juggernaut' or 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Badass?'

Indeed, the hardest choices in life are those we force on ourselves.

Eh, fuck it. A little bit of both.

I slowly walked through the glacier, my smile as warm as the pyromancy burning in my core. I was completely healed when I stepped free, steam rising from my body in slow wafts of air.

"Now that the warm-up is out of the way," I said conversationally, unable to stop the pun and not wanting to. "Shall we begin?"

Throughout the little skirmish, I kept my hands behind my back.

Yorokobe, bitches.

******

Duck.

Slash.

Block.

Slash.

Stab.

Retreat.

Charge.

Jump.

Slash.

Hippolyta was fighting for her life.

An ent tried to wrap its roots around her leg, and she turned it into kindling with a slam of her shield.

Hippolyta was fighting for her sisters.

Swamp Thing took the opportunity to rain deadly spores on her. Holding her breath, Hippolyta threw herself away as Penelope cast a spell to clear the air in a torrent of wind. Some still landed on her, and her supernaturally enhanced skin turned grey, impeding her movements.

Hippolyta was fighting for her new home.

She threw herself back onto the offensive, sword slashing out at a wall of thorns, shearing through them and stopping the hail of barbs. Her youngest gave her a nod of acknowledgement as they worked together to free Artemis from a cage of steal-like wood.

Hippolyta was fighting for their pride.

The three of them barely had time to cut through a portion of the wall, giving her sister Amazon just enough room to escape before she was squeezed to death.

They separated again, Artemis going to aid Diana as they tried to cut off the Scarlet Aeonia without succumbing to its Rot. Donna retreated to back up Penelope, defending her as she wielded the Bounded Field against their sieging enemy.

Hippolyta was fighting for the right to survive in a world that had left her people behind millennia ago.

And she loved it.

Damned to Hades and back, but she loved it.

Her skin was rotting. She was covered in sap and blood. Her new home had been all but destroyed already. Even if they survived today, all their work from the last few weeks had been undone by this foe.

It was disheartening. It was scary.

Even with all her experience, Hippolyta still felt a trill of fear run through her every time one of her sisters came close to losing their life at the hands of this elemental. They had lost so many already. The idea of losing even one more had kept her up at night.

And yet…

And yet…

Hippolyta hadn't felt this alive in years.

Not since she had left her land to explore Man's World, the first Wonder Woman in a time of world wars, and did battle with the evil men of that age.

Leviathan had been a disaster. One that had cost her too many of her friends and family.

But it hadn't been a fight, not really.

The beast had been a tsunami. Deadly. Sudden. And they had been almost completely defenceless, unable to fight back as it stayed miles from shore and wore them down as water did rock over centuries.

Leviathan had been a calamity.

Swamp Thing was an enemy.

A foe that could be fought. That could be slain.

Dangerous. Devastating. Deadly. But Hippolyta's sword could reach him.

Five minutes. That was what the girl had asked for.

Hippolyta loved every second of it.

And she wasn't the only one.

Thetis's eyes were alight in a way they hadn't been in centuries as a vine stabbed through her thigh. She tore it from the main body and used it to impale the overgrowth in turn.

Andrea's smile was bloodthirsty as yellow flowers bloomed, raining lighting down on her. Her shield crackled with the energy, her arm charring. As the fulmination faded, she threw it, sawing through the deadly bouquet.

Even Donna smirked as she deflected blades of sharpened grass, twice her height and three times her width, away from the priestess.

Only two people didn't seem as enamoured with the battle.

Diana, trying to tear through the red flower that made the giant's head, and the woman responsible for keeping all of them alive.

"Fucking muscle heads," Amelia grumbled as she reknit skin and sinew for an Amazon who had lost an arm.

As soon as she was healed, the woman threw herself against the moving mountain again. The biokinetic flew towards another injured combatant, coughing blood and chunks of lung. As Amelia flew, her eyes fired beams of heat, carving through the ents surrounding her newest patients.

"You girls are worse than the X-men, I swear. What makes you think inhaling glowing

silver spores is a good idea? Huh?"

"Didn't, cough, have a choice," Hippolyta heard Artemisia say to the healer as she took a deep breath.

"And throwing your sword at a tree?" Panacea asked sarcastically. "Did you choose that?"

"Seemed like a good idea at the time," the Amazon smirked.

"Don't think because you're hot, I won't give you diabetes if you back talk," Amelia snorted as she finished her work.

"You won't because you'll be too busy," Artemisia said, pulling the healer in for a quick kiss filled with tongue. "Find me when this is done. I haven't been this excited in centuries."

Then Artemisia was off, flying to pick up her weapon and carving through the army of walking trees.

Amelia stared dumbly for a half second before regaining her faculties and stomping off towards her next patient, face red as she grumbled about amazons, thighs and abs.

Hippolyta felt her smirk turn into a genuine smile for a second as she carved through a wall of ice summoned by white flowers.

Artemisia had been so… listless for so long now. Even before the destruction of Themyscira, she hadn't taken a lover in centuries and had barely even touched her hobbies. The once great sculptor had not so much as whittled in almost a thousand years.

This was what her people needed if they were to continue.

Her people loved peace. There was no doubt about that. They had lived for millennia without a war or conflict, resting and recovering after Man's World had inflicted atrocities on them.

They had no desire for conquest. No wish to kill and pillage. Themyscira had been a paradise of peace and beauty.

And it had cost them.

Hippolyta had thought Mikael a fool when he called them pets. He had been the typical male, she had thought. Looking down on her and her sisters for their lack of desire to conquer the world, for only wanting to live in peace. He had felt them weak because they entrusted their safety to the gods and had no wish to go against them.

She now saw what he truly meant.

Mikael hadn't been criticizing their desire for peace. He did not call them pets because they were women or weak or had no wish for war.

Mikael had called them pets because that was what they had become.

A pet isn't just subservient to its masters. It is dependent on them.

Food. Water. Shelter. Pleasure. It was all handed to the Amazons on a silver platter. They had no fear. No want that went unmet. Even the few duties required of them by the gods were things easily accomplished.

The Amazons had survived their traumatic fates, but that was all they did.

They survived.

They did not live.

They had traded one form of slavery for another. One on padded cushions, plentiful food, and less onerous demands. They lived in luxury. In peace.

And it had almost cost them everything.

A dog raised with gentle hands and luxurious treats cannot survive when cast onto the streets.

Left without a master in a world that had passed them by, the Amazons had been adrift. Even their choice to come to this Island had been because of a message from their goddesses rather than any decision of their own.

Mikael had let them settle on his land, but that was it. He offered no aid except knowledge. He promised nothing and demanded nothing, no matter what he joked about.

Whether they lived or died would depend solely on their efforts.

And the Amazons needed that.

They needed something to take pride in once more. They needed a way to tell themselves they were still Amazons.

They needed a will to live.

New Themiscira was destroyed? They would rebuild. Over and over again if that is what it took.

They, who had built their civilization as women in a world for men, would carry on as they always had and always would. They'd fight. They'd live.

A thorn pierced Hippolyta's thigh, and it bloomed, thorns sprouting from her flesh as her leg was covered in blood-red roses.

The Queen of the Amazons cut off her leg in a heartbeat, the limb falling to the wooded ground and disappearing among the writhing branches.

Hippolyta's teeth grit from the pain, yet her smile never faded as her blood showered the land.

They were Amazons.

And a demented dryad would not be the end of the Amazons.

"Mother!" Diana cried, retreating to aid the injured Queen.

"I shall live," Hippolyta said, closing the wound with one of the only spells she had ever learned.

She simply didn't have the talent for magic some of her sisters did, but with enough practice, she could learn one or two tricks. And she had plenty of time to practice.

"Where is that girl," Wonder Woman grumbled as the red flower, the Scarlet Bloom, opened for the second time in the fight.

It was beautiful. It's multi-layered petals glinting in the light like fire.

They knew what came next. They had seen it in the battle against Melania. They had seen it once before today.

"Retreat!" Hippolyta ordered her sisters, and, as one, they scattered to the sky.

The flower bloomed, butterflies filling the air as red Rot covered the sky.

Three of her sisters were too slow to escape, and they bent over, sickness spilling from them as they started to die from the inside out.

They would have perished had Panacea not been there.

With a speed that didn't pale one bit before the Amazons, the healer flew towards the dying women, scooping them up in her arms, already healing them as she carried them away from the red cloud of death.

The Rot could not hurt the healer, lacking as it was its spiritual component. Her power turned every particle that tried to infect her into harmless powder.

Thanks to the biokinetic and the knowledge Mikael had shared, the Amazons had yet to experience a casualty. Without them, they would have held on for the five minutes requested, but it would have been a pyrrhic victory.

But it would have been a victory, nonetheless.

Because they had one more aid.

Medea the cat inhaled, and every butterfly, every infected molecule of Rot that floated in the air, was sucked into the black hole that was her mouth.

If Mikael's knowledge and Panacea's healing were the reason the Amazons hadn't lost anyone, they could fight the monster in the first place because of the fat cat. Otherwise, it would just fill the air with its deadly spores, and they would have no choice but to flee before it.

The tubby floof wasn't even really fighting, just eating.

It seemed to think every deadly airborne pathogen was a delicious snack and eagerly consumed it all, face set in a smugly satisfied cat smirk.

"When this is over, she's getting her own Sandworm," Hippolyta said with a chuckle.

To think the pet of the Elden Lord, the fat cat who demanded leftovers and tummy rubs, was so formidable.

"Go to Panacea," Diana told her mother. "She'll heal you. Rejoin us after."

"You forget yourself, daughter. I am still Queen. This will not stop me. T'is but a

scratch," Hippolyta denied, launching back at Swamp Thing.

She didn't need both legs to kick ass.

She didn't see Diana's brow twitch at her words before she rejoined the battle as well.

For a while, Hippolyta lost herself in a glorious battle once more.

Lost herself in the thrill, the euphoria of combat that she hadn't felt in so long.

Ah, she realized in a brief moment of Insight.

This is what Mikael desired. What this entire land was built on.

Freedom and Life.

It was deadly. It was ugly. It was painful.

But that was the beauty of it.

In overcoming that challenge. In standing up after you are knocked down.

In finding the beauty beyond the pain. The joy of life in the fear of death.

Success after failure.

To see a mountain and want to climb it, not because there was a reward at the top but because you wanted to pit yourself against it.

It was such a human desire.

In that brief moment of clear Insight, Hippolyta could understand why a version of her daughter loved the man. Why she could settle for being one of many lovers.

Then, the Insight was gone as battle claimed all her focus.

But all things must end.

The good and the bad.

The pain and the beauty.

Everything is transient.

Even an Avatar of the Green.

The end began when plants burst from the ground.

It was almost unnoticeable, lost among the tangle of all the other plant growth, if not for the fact that it didn't immediately try and attack the women fighting Swamp Thing.

It started as long grass, braiding itself together in thick strands that wrapped the moving mountain's enormous legs in their coiling embrace. From the grass, seeds burst, and trees grew in a tangle of wood and leaves.

Here, the Amazons noticed the change and retreated, ready for a new trick.

But it was not targeting them.

Swamp Thing was not idle. Lightning and ice crackled along his body, freezing and shattering this new growth as it held him tight.

The forest writhed in civil war as two powerful beings tried to control it.

One was the elemental, the champion of The Green.

The other only controlled what she grew herself, but she had the greater claim, for she was of this land.

This Island, this soul, would never submit to anyone.

But there were some it cared for. So it helped her.

Even as Swamp Thing resisted, growing his own plants to counter this new attacker, she grew around him. A long strand of grass that grew no matter how tough the battle.

It wrapped. It coiled. It wreathed itself in massive, twisting vines and gnarled wooden limbs.

Hippolyta realized she was staring at a dragon.

An eastern dragon, long and sinuous, made of wood, grass, and vines. It grew around Swamp Thing, wrapping him in its coils. Its head was the last to form, larger than their village had been. It was a thing of wooden fangs, green scales, and eyes lit with a purple glow.

“Sorry for the wait,” Glory Girl said as she arrived beside the watching Amazons. “Took longer than I hoped to get their attention. Most of the Family are off the Island.”

With the new arrival, Swamp Thing’s effort to escape the coiling dragon redoubled. The scarlet flower bloomed, releasing its deadly Rot right in the creature’s mouth.

The dragon bit down, swallowing the crimson flower, Rot and all, as it continued to grow. Already, it was longer than Swamp Thing’s mountainous body, but with each second that passed, its body grew thicker. Wider.

Even as lightning, frost, rot, and all manner of other attacks pelted it, the dragon just healed and grew.

“That’s Tsunade, isn’t it,” Amelia asked, flying to her sister’s side.

“Yeah,” Glory Girl nodded, an awkward look on her face.

“Fuck,” Panacea spat, reaching out to Hippolyta and starting the process of regrowing her leg. Weariness overtook the Queen as energy was sapped from her to fuel the process. “She shouldn’t be here in her condition.”

“There weren’t many options at. Tsunade said she could handle it,” Victoria said awkwardly. “She’s not very far along. And she didn’t come alone.”

“Who else is here?”

“Cilla.”

Only when the shadow passed over the sky did Hippolyta realize that the wooden dragon wasn’t the killing blow.

It was the second, much smaller beast that fell from the sky, landing on the ‘decapitated’ head of Swamp Thing, where the Scarlet Bloom once resided, that was to do Thanatos’ work.

This dragon was the size of a large house rather than a mountain and of a more western style with two wings and four limbs.

Despite her fantastic eyesight, Hippolyta had trouble making out the details of the thing. It both did and didn't have scales. Its shape was indistinct as if its body was made of a grey mist instead of flesh and blood. Its scales might be metallic silver, or it could be covered in fluffy white fur, or that fur could be innumerable tiny scythes.

Hippolyta couldn't tell.

All she could say was if she had to, she'd much rather fight the wood dragon the size of a mountain than this… Hades wrought, hauntingly beautiful creature.

Thankfully, she didn't have to look at it for long as it tore itself a hole in the moving mountain, digging with claw, and fang, and wings of Lifehunt scythes.

The mountain shook, vines, trees, and plants falling in an avalanche of dead plant matter as Priscilla carved her way through Swamp Thing's constructed body.

Even as the Avatar of the Green tried to fight the creature within himself, the wood dragon continued its assault from the outside, tearing great chunks from the beast.

But it wasn't enough.

No matter how the two dragons tore the massive humanoid plant apart, it regrew and fought back, desperately struggling to free itself from its coiling prison.

Swamp Thing would not die so easily.

"IT'S JUST PLANTS!" Panacea suddenly yelled to the battling figures, startling the Amazons, who had been reduced to spectators in the battle between kaiju. "IT'S NOT HIS REAL BODY!"

Again, Hippolyta realized.

They were watching someone fight their battles again.

This wouldn't do.

"AMAZONS!" The Queen shouted. Despite the weariness, pain and fatigue, her voice didn't waver. "CHARGE!"

It was a simple war cry, but Hippolyta didn't think she had anything in her for something more.

Her sisters didn't care. They rose once more, joining the fight again despite injuries and fatigue.

As they started cutting once more into the plant elemental, the back of the wood dragon's neck erupted.

Hippolyta saw a giant of a woman, skinless and green, as if her muscles were made from bone and grass, jump from the suddenly inert dragon.

The titan of a woman flew backwards in an enormous leap, landing with boom in the

crater of what was once New Themyscira.

Then the giant sat down, crossed her legs and started to meditate. Her forehead glowed a bright purple as lines spread across her form from a diamond pattern on her skull.

Hippolyta could see no more. Swamp Thing had taken advantage of his dragon prison, which was no longer moving, and was trying to grow through the gaps in the coils, a new body forming outside the confinement.

The Amazons were there to stop him.

Like a steel wall, they blocked his escape, cutting even the slighted blade of grass that wiggled free from the dragon's body.

Aided by Priscilla still rampaging around within his body, they would not allow this being who had destroyed their new home the slightest chance of survival.

Hippolyta, dedicated to seeing that Swamp Thing could not escape, almost missed the opportunity.

The titanic woman, over twenty meters tall, had risen from meditation and approached the battle once more. Her steps went unnoticed in the clamour of battle, but Hippolyta caught the glowing purple light of her diamond as Tsunade ran up to the leg of the moving mountain.

Glory Girl, blasting away at Swamp Thing with her own heat vision and smashing vines as they approached, did not notice the giant woman below her.

Victoria did notice as the side of the monstrous construction exploded, an enormous force blasting open the body of the coiled dragon as a human-sized figure made of vines flew through the air toward her. Arms outstretched and grasping for her in desperation.

Hippolyta was there, sword swinging to sever the vines that connected Swamp Thing to his mountain-sized body.

Tsunade was there, jumping with enough force to crater the ground as her fist plowed into Swamp Thing's main body, shattering it into splinters and wood pulp.

Then Priscilla was there, her claws like scythes that seemed to suck in the life force of everything around her as she cut through a seed the size of a human head.

All Glory Girl saw was the Avatar of the Green collapse, inches from her face.

The Amazons released a cheer of victory as the mountain fell.

******

Emma watched, keeping her mind split as she observed the world from their position on top of the Jewel. Without touching Mikael, she needed to be outside their home for her

powers to pass through the dimensional barriers.

Half her focus was on searching for Pryor or Sinister. She had met both in her last life, so she was relatively familiar with their mental signatures. So long as they weren't too different in this world, she'd be able to find them as soon as they poked their heads up.

The other half was focused on her husband's meeting with the heroes.

It was going well.

They had entered Artoria's Noble Phantasm and acknowledged her authority. Even Guardian had been content to watch without interfering, using it as a way to evaluate the abilities of the people of Earth.

Emma had spent a few minutes finding out what she could from his mind.

It was well-defended, so she couldn't get everything without touching Mikael, but the gist she could get was that he had been called because of the X-men's previous experience with the Phoenix Force and the Shi'ar Empire. He was here to ensure no Dark Phoenix emerged and would fight Mikael and Melina to ensure that didn't happen.

Emma trusted Mikael to handle the alien and the implications of the Shi'ar being here, even as he convinced the heroes around him of his innocence.

Or at least gave them enough doubt that they wouldn't attack immediately.

'Anything yet?' Yoruichi whined through their mental connection. She was sprawled out on the Jewel beside Emma.

'Should she have anything, she would have told us,' Ranni chastised. 'Patience, cat. Patience.'

'But I'm bored. The Titty Queen is going to have all the fun if things break down.'

'And if they don't, we will,' Robin responded.

'The anticipation before the battle is like hunger. It enhances the meal,' Scathach said philosophically.

Emma didn't think Yoruichi needed to be told that. She was one of the most experienced and oldest of the Family. She just liked playing the part of the cat.

Much like Mikael.

'Wanna spar while we wait?' Yoruichi asked the celt.

'Please do not,' Glynda sighed. 'I do not wish to have to clean up another mess. I imagine there will be plenty of others that will need my attention.'

'Not if noth-'

'Quiet!' Emma ordered, and her fellow Chosen immediately complied.

Emma focused all her attention on the Hall and its inhabitants. Mikael had done it, and things were breaking up peacefully.

If the enemy was targeting Melina, internal strife, or some sort of battle between her

Family and this world's heroes, they wouldn't allow things to end this way.

But what would they do? Stage an attack on the conference? Use their shapeshifter or whatever they had to further frame them? Or do something else to instigate dissent?

Emma received her answer as her mind fluttered over the X-men.

They were huddled in a group, talking with Professor Xavier through telepathy and briefing him on the situation, when a second telepathy interrupted their communication.

'SCOTT!'

'Maddie?' Her ex-husband replied back with a start. 'Is that you? How are you doing this? Where are you? What happened? Where's Nathan?'

'I don't have much time,' Madelyne Pryor said in a hurry, her mental voice fading in and out. 'I barely escaped. They still have our son.'

'Who?' Wolverine asked. Trust Logan to focus on the critical question.

'The Elden Lord. He took us. Needs us for something to do with the Phoenix Force. I don't know what. He will spin some lies, but I found out the truth. I'm…' Here, Pryor paused as if she couldn't believe her next words herself. 'I'm Jean Grey. I never died. Just lost my memories. That's why he needs me.'

Emma could feel the disbelief, fear, concern, and love radiate from that mental communication, and it was all she could do not to gag.

What had she ever seen in that man? Scott Summers didn't just believe the dumb bitch's words. He was retroactively validating his decisions based on her words alone. Ignoring all the red flags, this should be raising.

At the least, the others retained some skepticism, even if they would go along with it for now.

'I can't keep this up,' Pryor said, strain in her mental voice. 'I'm on his Island. It's all I can do to send this. Kill him. If you destroy his human body, he has to open the Island to build another. That's how you can get in and rescue us. Please, Scott. Please save us-'

Emma actually did retch, bile filling her at the thought of once loving someone who would fall for something so… stupid.

But that had been someone else, she told herself. Not her. She wasn't that Emma Frost. She was the woman born from that woman's corpse.

And she had a duty to her husband.

'I'm sending the location,' Emma told Raven.

'Got it,' the Demon Lord said simply as she consumed the Family in shadow, teleporting them to where Emma had traced Pryor's mind.

It was a doorway, a portal to a pocket dimension, that the clone had stepped out of to make the mental call. She was flanked on both sides by mutant guards, members of

Sinister's Mauraders.

'You can kill the man,' Emma told the group as they emerged from a pool of shadow behind the trio before they could return through the portal. 'Don't kill the woman.'

The trio didn't stand a chance.

A barbed spear pierced Harpoon's chest, the cloned mutant not even having time to scream before his head was destroyed by Yoruichi's kick. Diana had already knocked Pryor unconscious, slinging the woman over her shoulder and into Raven's shadow.

The third person there, Mystique, was also knocked unconscious. Robin stood over the blue-skinned woman, eyeing her curiously.

'Why not? Are you going to try and get Mikael to fuck her, too?' Yoruichi said crudely.

Emma's eye twitched in annoyance as she let Artoria, Melina, and Mikael know they had their target. Or at least one of them.

'Because she'll spill everything we want once Mikael frees her from that necklace of hers,' Emma explained. 'That's Mystique, a shapeshifter. The original. Not a clone like the other. She's likely the one that helped frame us. She's being possessed by a psychic entity in that necklace. We get her, we clear our name.'

'Fair enough,' Yoruichi shrugged, throwing the unconscious woman into Raven's shadow as well. 'What's on the other side of this portal.'

'I don't know,' Emma answered. 'It's a separate dimension entirely. Probably made to hide from Cerebro. You'll be going in blind, but expect heavy resistance. Sinister has had centuries to build his hideout.'

'Sounds fun,' Scathach chuckled.

'Our priority is the child,' Diana said sternly. 'As well as any other prisoners. Raven? You are in charge of finding them and keeping them safe. We'll deal with everything else.'

'Understood,' the goth nodded, turning back into shadows and sliding through the portal.

They gave her a few seconds head start before following in after her.

It was a lab.

Emma didn't know why she expected differently.

Long halls, sterilized white, filled with cameras and steel doors lining the corridor.

And guns. Lots of guns.

As soon as they stepped through the portal, the machine gun turrets opened fire on them.

It barely shot three bullets before Yoruichi had reduced it to scrap.

The Family advanced, spreading out through the facility in a tide of violence and

destruction.

Yoruichi, Ranni, Diana, Glynda, Medea, and Scathach each chose a direction, the massive complex giving them all the chance to fight their own battles.

Emma and Robin remained behind beside the portal. Both to secure a retreat if needed because they didn't have to move to be part of the battle.

Emma could finally feel the minds of everyone here, and she was still powered by her husband's Command Seal. She tore through mind after mind, leaving bodies behind as the consciousnesses that controlled them turned into so many mental rags.

But something was off.

Emma was encountering a lot more resistance than expected. Sinister had psychics on his team, certainly, but not enough to stand up against her, backed by her husband's power.

So why was she forced to go one mind at a time instead of controlling them all simultaneously? Something about the people here was resisting her. Something more than psychics.

Emma puzzled over the quandary as she and her fellow Chosen tore this lair to shreds.

A veritable army of clones, genetically engineered monsters, and robots was hidden within this base.

A monument to a man ready to take on the world.

And it meant almost nothing.

This wasn't a fight. This was a slaughter.

The only reason Sinister had been a problem had been because they couldn't find him. Now that they had, he was finished.

Emma relished in the feeling of power, of victory, as her sisters tore Mister Sinister's lab to pieces, minute by minute.

This was seriously getting her motor running. She'd have to pick up where she left off with her husband. Anyone trying to clam-jam her again would get a very sudden and violent lobotomy.

'If you find Sinister, let me know,' Medea reminded them as she rained magic on two clones of Riptide. 'I don't want to miss the chance to experiment with my curses because you all got excited. Right, Yoruichi?'

'Hey,' the shinigami protested playfully. 'Why are you singling me out?'

'Because you are going so fast you barely pay attention to who you're pummeling,' Robin deadpanned.

'So is Scatahch!'

'I know exactly who I have slain,' the celt replied haughtily.

‘But-‘

‘I have the child,’ Raven interrupted Yoruichi, and Emma focused on that connection to see through the Demon Lord’s eyes.

Sure enough, Nathan Summers was in Pride’s arms as the four-eyed woman stared at the infant in disgust.

‘Pride, take him to Tsunade,’ Robin ordered. ‘We’ll want her and Mikael to check him over before we return him and his mother.’

‘Fine,’ Pride pouted as she disappeared, grumbling about little snot rags.

‘Emma,’ Ranni’s voice echoed through the channel. Something about it sent a shiver down the White Queen’s spine. ‘Thou should witness this.’

It took barely an instant before the mutant was watching through the goddess’ eyes.

She almost didn’t recognize Sinister.

Gone was the imposing yet controlled man she remembered. A mind so formidable that even when she faced it in her last life, she had never been assured of her victory over him in a head-to-head contest.

In the place of Nathaniel Essex was a… thing.

A monstrous creature of bloated flesh, weeping blood from open sores. Seven limbs threw themselves at Ranni’s dolls, claws and cloven hooves smashing porcelain to splinters. Innumerable eyes covered the beastly body, blinking in and out of focus as he howled and snarled.

He was still shaped vaguely like a man, but one that had been crossed with some sort of bloated pig.

Emma could feel the creature’s mind. It retained the sinister intelligence of the man, but the control, the willpower of the man who had lived for centuries, was gone. Intelligent but unfocused.

Where once was a man capable of waiting centuries, of manipulating generations of heroes and villains to ensure his plans come to fruition, he was a beast. A cross between man and monster.

Emma felt a trill of fear.

Not for the monster that was once a mutant.

For what it meant.

She spread her mind through the facility. No longer attacking the blood-drunk beings within, the source of their resistance now known, she was focused solely on gathering information.

She saw them. Hundreds of them. Feasting on bloody flesh. Grunting as they tore each other apart.

Being slaughtered and bled like pigs.

An ocean of Blood.

Mikael was not going to like this.

******

Man, I loved this.

I ducked under a blast of red energy, flattening myself against the ground, then sprang in a flip that landed me on Iceman's glacial shoulders. He tried to freeze me in place, but I was already gone, delivering a flying kick to Storm's stomach.

This fight served a purpose. Not only did it delay time for Emma and the rest of my wives to get the kidnap victims and capture or kill Sinister, but it also played into Gladiator's weakness.

He alone could account for about half of the Shi'ar Empire's martial forces, but his abilities depended entirely on his confidence. Forced to helplessly watch things play out, knowing he could do nothing to help the allies he was called by, Gladiator was bound to be feeling the pressure. If he decided to start shit after this, I'd feed him to Medea.

My position in the air left me open to Nightcrawler teleporting behind me. He wasn't alone. Collossus fell like a ton of steel, driving me to the floor with his weight.

I didn't have time to dodge, so I fell with his massive bulk.

I hit the ground back first, spine snapping and skull shattering. Blood and grey matter splattered the floor.

I grinned.

My hands were planted beside my head for leverage. The Russian mutant had a moment of realization when he noticed my feet on his chest before I kicked back up like a frog. The massive body hit the hall's ceiling, and Colossus fell back down with an earth-shaking crash.

I was already on my feet again, fending off a flurry of attacks from an angry Canadian midget.

Yes, this fight served a purpose.

But it was also damned fun.

When was the last time I had actually enjoyed a battle?

Training with my wives was always enjoyable, but it wasn't an actual battle, no matter how brutal we got.

Not my fight against the gods. Trigon had been a contest of schemes, not skill. And nothing in Bloodborne had been enjoyable, too consumed as I was by the fear of what I

had to do.

Wolverine was one of the most overpowered characters in Marvel comics. Not in his potential for destruction, though that remained considerable, but in his skill and the sheer potency of his healing factor. He could, and had, shrugged off a nuke before.

Unless I started using the godslaying blade, I wouldn't be killing him, no matter how many times I ripped out his heart. On top of that, he was easily one of the most skilled hand-to-hand fighters this planet had to offer. Fighting the little man was fun. Incredibly so.

Now, if only…

Ah, there we go.

I allowed three adamantine claws to pierce my bicep, twisting my arm to the side to drag them away so I had an opening to throw the mutant over my shoulder and into Rogue.

That freed me up to throw myself away from a rain of icicles.

And right into Magik's sword, plunging into my heart.

Perfect.

Horah Loux. That had been the last fight I had truly loved. A pure joy. A celebration of violence and skill.

I was facing a type of Saitama problem. I was too strong for the fights I would enjoy. But I was also too weak to truly be unrivalled. I straddled a line, but still, I didn't regret it.

I would never be able to have this much fun if I had…

Never mind. Focus on the here and now.

I staggered back, and Illyana Rasputina tried to pull the blade free.

She failed.

Her eyes widened as I tore it from her grasp, still trapped in my heart.

Let's see… The Soulsword was a magical blade designed to counter magic, almost like Rule Breaker, and made from Illyana's life force and the eldritch energy of Limbo, but I knew it could have other wielders.

Hmmm, life force. Magic. Eldritch energy. I should be able to…

Ah. There we go.

The Soulsword turned a blinding white as I pulled it from my still-beating heart.

"Well, now," I chuckled at the horror on Magik's face. "Thank you for this. I am much better with a blade than I am with my hands."

And I was. I was good at hand-to-hand. Very good.

But I had conquered worlds with a sword.

"Round two?" I asked innocently as the X-men stared at me in grim determination.

Yes. This was what it meant to be a heel. Someone you loved to hate. The casual arrogance. The swagger.

If I wasn't careful, I'd put on a dark cloak and start muttering about 'shadows' in an edgy voice.

Thankfully, I hadn't gone full Chuuni. I was just having fun.

I laughed as my blade met Logan's claws, the clinking of metal on metal familiar music to my ears.

'Mikael.' Emma's voice echoed in my mind.

Ah, my fun was coming to an end.

'What's up? You find them?' I asked as I used the flat of my blade to deflect more of Cyclops' beams and then carved through a pillar of ice.

'We did. But we found something else.'

'Anything I need to know about?'

I laughed out loud again as, in a bid to reclaim the sword, Nightcrawler and Magik teleported behind me on both sides to try and grab my arms.

I jumped, forming a platform like Torrent under my feet as I backflipped.

I tried to stop myself.

I really did.

But I couldn't.

The temptation was too much for a mere mortal like me.

As I flipped over her, I smacked Magik in the ass with the flat of her own sword.

'Boars. Hundreds of them.'

'Boars?' I asked, confused.

I don't remember anything about boars being related to Sinister in the comics. There were a few boar-like mutants, though.

Logan was good. He was an outstanding fighter. All the X-men were individually, and they worked increadibly well as a team.

But they were no Malenia, Blade of Miquella

I had the room to talk to my wife even as I fended off the hero team with my sword.

'From the Island,' Emma said grimly.

I almost asked 'which boars.' Killer boars were pretty common in Fromsoft's games.

But then I remembered Superman's question.

'Batman says it is called Sanguine? Made to replicate Elixir's power.'

My blood froze.

All joy left me.

Magik fired a bolt of energy at me, point blank. I dodged. Her sword impaled her knee

to the ground.

She screamed.

I didn't have time for this.

The X-men were saying something.

I didn't care.

Logan lunged. I let his claws sink into my lungs.

I didn't need to breathe.

My hands formed their own draconic claws. They impaled him back.

Crystal grew from within him, lifting Wolverine up and holding him as more burst from his skin as I locked his metal skeleton in place.

He was roaring in pain, but I didn't have time for that.

I grabbed Nightcrawler by his tail when he tried to teleport Magik away.

I filled him with so much lighting that he started to smoke.

I didn't have time for this.

I teleported behind Rogue, grabbed her arm, and teleported again behind Iceman.

I held them together until their screaming stopped, then I let them fall to the ground.

Colossus tried to stop me. I grabbed one of his hands and squeezed. Metal bent.

He tried to punch me with the other. Chaos Flame turned metal black.

I didn't have fucking time for this.

Storm tried to put out the flames unsuccessfully.

I jumped, and my hand was around her neck.

I slammed her skull into the ground.

Only Cyclops was left.

He was blasting me with everything he had, yelling in anger, pain, and rage.

We didn't have fucking time for this.

I ran through his lasers as they carved chunks from me.

My hand was over his face, his visor crumbling in my grasp as I covered every inch of his skull, but his nose and ears in glintstone crystal so dense it would take days for him to cut himself free.

"This is over," I ordered the room. "If I wanted anyone dead, I would have killed them. If I wanted to kidnap someone, no one here could have stopped me. This. Is. Over!"

The hall was silent.

None of the X-men were dead; I had made sure of it, but they wouldn't be going anywhere for a long time unless they were healed. Cyclops and Magik were the only two still conscious.

I looked to Artoria, who had watched the entire spectacle without so much as

twitching.

"They've been punished," I told her. "The kidnapped mother and son have been rescued. They are with my wives. Justice has been served. All this bullshit ends now."

The King judged me, green gold eyes staring into my soul.

I let her power judge the truth of my words.

Artoria nodded, and the spell was broken.

Everyone was free once more.

As the heroes were released, I saw them ready for a fight. My brutality hadn't made me any friends.

Too bad.

"Stop."

I put every ounce of my untrained Conquerors Haki into the order.

The room froze once more.

"We don't have time for petty politics right now," I said to the room, sweeping my gaze imperiously around and eventually landing on Superman. "If you hate me, want to fight me, or whatever, we can sort that crap out later. Right now, we have an emergency. Worse than anything this world has ever faced."

"What?"

His face was grave. Serious. Angry.

I couldn't bring myself to care whether he was mad at me or not. This was not the time to play nice.

"A plague," I said seriously. "Sinister had a plague worse than this world has ever handled within his base. I believe he spread it around using that medicine you mentioned. Sanguine. If I am right, the body count will be greater than every villain, disaster, or Endbringer attack put together. It will make the bubonic plague look like chicken pox."

I could see the horror dawning on their faces.

Good.

I didn't tell them it could have come from my Island. I didn't want to argue about responsibility when time was of the essence. I didn't even know how the bastard managed to get hundreds of Maneater boars. Something to torture out of Sinister later.

If he was already dead, I'd just torture his soul.

Right now, I needed to do everything I could to prevent the spread of the Beast Plague. I would worry about responsibility later.

"What do we need to do?" Captain America asked, looking at the forms of the X-men.

"Melina will heal them," I waived off their concern. "We'll reunite the family later. That doesn't matter right now. Right now, we need to-"

I felt it.

An attempt at forced teleportation.

I naturally resisted.

I had time to look over my shoulder.

With a glassy look on his face, Stephan Strange cast the spell.

Everyone was teleported away.

Everyone but me and my wives.

Some of this world's greatest, most beloved heroes had entered Ehangwen under the flag of peace. The Justice League was gutted. Entire PRT teams were gone. Guardian, the representative of the Shi'ar, had disappeared.

Only I and my wives would exit.

Right when I needed help the most.

Well played, Oppressor.

Author's Note:

I won't say much here to not delay publishing further. Just that I am sorry for the delay. The same IRL stuff that made the last chapters shorter than usual has continued, but I promised to finish Obsession with this chapter, and I keep my promises. Also sorry for the slightly lower quality. I only have time for one round of edits.
I will see you all next week.

SIDE STORY V: FLOOFY HEARTS (ADULT)

"Music is the shorthand of emotion."
— Leo Tolstoy

■

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in, FamilyFloofDragon

You are viewing:

• Threads you have replied to

• AND Threads that have new replies

• OR private message conversations with new replies

• Thread OP is displayed.

• Ten posts per page

• Last ten messages in private message history.

• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

■

♦ Topic: Priscilla's First Concert!

In: Boards ► Supers ► Elden Lord ► Priscilla

MusicManiac (Original Poster)

Posted On Dec 1st 2018:

WOOOOT!

PRISCILLA CONCERT!!! FUCK YEAH!!!

I got three tickets. If you want to go, get them now. They're disappearing quick.

I can't wait. Me, my girlfriend and my sister are huge fans.

What do you think the song list will be? Priscilla's pretty much only done covers on stream, right? Will she have original songs? Songs from other worlds? Will Mikael join her? Any of the rest of her Family? What does a band with The Faerie Queen and Solomon Grundy look like? Does she have other spirits in it? Is this going to be a true thriller?

I have no answers, but I need to know!!!!!

(Showing page 3 of 24)

►Logs

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Damn it, already sold out. T_T

►**Dailuute**
Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

At least you had a shot, I live on the other side of the planet. No way can I get a flight so last minute.

►**GreenBeanMachine** (Verified Super) (Teen Titan)
Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

That sucks, dudes. I hope you'll be turning in to watch it at least.

►**Space Zombie**
Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

BEASTBOY-MAN, how you doing? Will you be there? And how can we watch it?

►**GreenBeanMachine** (Verified Super) (Teen Titan)
Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

All the Titans will be there OBJ

►**GreenBeanMachine** (Verified Super) (Teen Titan)

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Glynda Goodwitch. She's awesome. I'll ask her if I can post some vids of our training.

@ Thanks, it's been a rough go, but everyone's been so cool that we can't let you guys down.

►**Affectionstarved**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Nnnngggggg, the idea of that woman in tight gym clothes…. I need a moment.

►**MR.Krew**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Cease your thirst for another woman in this channel. Can you not tell this is a holy thread dedicated to our pure, floofy dragon princess?

BTW: Priscilla's dress? Wow. Where can I get one and will she wear it during the concert? Probably not, but if that's what she wore to a Super convention, I can't wait to see what she wears for the actual show.

Also, those furry robes did not do her justice.

We thank our Lord and Saviour, Master of Mammarys and Teacher of Thighs, Mikael for this holy image.

Bra-men.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 … 22, 23, 24

■

♦ **Topic: Emma Frost said it!**

In: Boards ► Supers ► Elden Lord ► General

CatagoryQueen (Original Poster)

Posted On Dec 1st 2018:

She said. That crazy woman actually said it.

I always knew Emma Frost had some serious Girl Boss energy, but to come right out, on national television, and say you want to marry the Elden Lord?

That takes some serious ovaries.

I bow to her majestic majesty, your majesty.

But seriously, I think we've all thought about it. Either being the Elden Lord or marrying his wives. God knows I've seen enough of you all in the NSFW portions of this site, thirsting over that entire family. The question is, will it work?

Mikael explicitly stated, in the video where he brought GG back, that he wasn't looking for other consorts. So far, that has remained true, as far as we can tell.

Does Emma Frost have a shot? Does anyone?

She's hot, but so are his wives. Some of whom are literal goddesses.

She's rich, but he owns his own subcontinent.

She's not a Super, but once she gets those 'benefits' GG spoke of, she will become a dragon.

With a name like Frost, she's gotta be an ice dragon, right? Otherwise, the gods of narrative convenience will never forgive us.

What do you guys think? Can Emma Frost seduce the dragon?

(Showing page 1 of 56)

►**Blasestrom**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Not a chance. Don't get me wrong, Frost is hot. Really hot. But compared to some other women? She just lacks an edge, ya know. Something that puts her above the crowd. A CEO of a billion-dollar corporation isn't really what I see Mikael going for.

►**Karolengine** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

If Mikael's taking more consorts, I would like to formally put my hat in the ring.

►**Mane Magenta**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

@ Karolengine You have a boyfriend.

►**Karolengine** (Super Groupie)

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

@ Mane Magenta He's also trying to join. Two for one.

►**Feychick**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

IF anyone joins, it's got to be a Super of some sort, right? Like Mikael's a trump, but there's gotta be something there to get his attention in the first place?

►**Antigone**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Propsing on national TV won't get his attention? And Priscilla didn't say anything against it when Sally asked her. I don't know, I think Frost has a shot. If nothing else, I have to respect the ambition.

►**Loyal**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Instead of arguing against Frost, who do you think should join? I, for one, am an advocate for using Dragon Jesus' Dragon Dick for good. Turn some villainess to the side of good through the power of love. (And sex. Besides, villainesses are hotter anyway)

-Poison Ivy

-Volcana

-Scarlet Witch

-Moord Nag

►**Bedwarmer**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Scarlet Witch isn't a villain. She's a former Avenger that decided to go back to living with daddy in his mutant-only country.

… Damn hot though.

►**Loyal**

Replied On Dec 1st 2018:

Eh~ anti-hero then. But imagine the diplomatic relation-

“Anything interesting?” I asked as I wrapped my arms around Priscilla’s waist and nuzzled at her neck, kissing it gently.

I was using her size-changing spell to make myself her size since we were in her room, and she wasn’t shrunk.

…Ok, I may have made myself a few inches taller than her, but it was for a good cause.

And as soon as I think of one that isn’t, ‘I like being taller than my wives, ‘ I will give it.

My floof dragon shivered at my touch, tail wrapping around my leg, as she wined in surprise.

“Sir Bard,” Priscilla pouted, but I noticed a hitch in her voice. Her tail continued to run up and down my leg. “Do not surprise me so.”

“Hmm,” I hummed, pretending to give it some thought. “Nope. I can’t stop myself. Your reactions are too cute. I need my fix.”

The crossbreed pouted at me, and I couldn’t resist the temptation.

I kissed her, her gasp of surprise granting me access to her tongue. Her eyes closed as our kiss deepened, her tail practically drawing hearts on my thigh with its tip.

“You never answered my question,” I said, pulling away from the kiss. “Are the netizens saying anything interesting?”

“Ah?” Priscilla, still in a daze, took a second to properly respond. “Ah! Sir Bard!” Her fist pounded fruitlessly against my chest in her embarrassment. “I would have answered had thy lips not claimed mine.”

“Weren’t you asking for a kiss?” I asked guilelessly. “Your lip was out and everything. I thought it was an invitation.”

“This is why I call thee a bard,” Priscilla complained, resting her head against my shoulder. Her tail continued to rub images on my thighs. Were those stick figures? It was hard to tell with just touch alone. “Thou shall twist all with thy words to suit thy needs. And without consequence. Thy voice’s beauty and charisma is the most unfair advantage in this world or any beyond.”

“I thought you called me a bard because I was a jack of all trades, good with magic and swords, and I rolled to seduce everything that moved?”

“While thy skill at the art of seduction is a thing to be feared, what do blades and spells have to do with bards?”

“Remind me to set up game night,” I said with a chuckle. “Not only do I think it will be fun, but a lot of my jokes will actually make sense if you all join me in my nerdom.”

“What manner of games,” Priscilla asked, perking up and staring at me with wide eyes.

“Role-playing,” I nodded. “We can do Dungeons and Dragons if we want to be classic about it, but there are a whole host of others. Maybe White Wolf or Powered by the Apocalypse. I’m sure Artoria, Diana, and Ranni will appreciate some classic war gaming, too. Hell, if we tape it and post it, I’m sure you’ll get a bunch of fans. The only thing nerds like more than nerd stuff is hot people doing nerd stuff.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Priscilla shook her head. “But I do not wish the others to overburden themselves to aid me. My music and skills shall carry me forward. Already, no more tickets for my concert are available for purchase.”

“Not surprised,” I nodded. “But I am glad to hear it. I’m really looking forward to seeing you on the big stage.”

“I shall not disappoint thee,” Priscilla said firmly, her eyes meeting mine.

“You won’t,” I smiled down at her.

Priscilla had come a long way from the princess in the tower, and while I played a part, it was almost all at her own initiative.

I would never have encouraged her to start streaming; it had been Victoria who had given her the idea, but it had all been Priscilla’s own efforts that got her this far. Sure, my other wives and I put forth our support to ease her path, but her success and failure would all depend on her efforts from here.

My floofy dragon was the perfect example of what I wanted in this world and why I had stayed as long as I had despite the risks and threats.

When you have infinite universes to explore and unlimited copies of the same people in an infinite number of situations, it is easy to drown in it all. To give nothing value because everything and everybody is replaceable.

But there is no joy in that.

When you can beat a game with a press of a button, what is the point of playing?

When you can sleep with a different woman every day, each more beautiful than the last, sex grows dull.

When you can conquer a world in an afternoon, when does conquest become a chore instead of a pleasure?

When you can Free yourself of everything, what is the point of anything?

Priscilla had stumbled, perhaps accidentally, on the same solution I had.

In an uncaring multiverse where nothing matters and everything is replaceable, you must assign value to what you care about and hold onto it fiercely.

It was the only solution to never going mad, growing bored with living, or worse,

losing yourself and becoming nothing more than a living machine, carrying out tasks not for joy or pleasure but because it is the only thing to do.

Priscilla had chosen music and made it Hers. Unlike me, she lacked Siren Song to make her voice supernaturally alluring. All she had was Talent, and talent only blooms when you put in the effort. Every day, she practiced, both in private and in front of her fans.

To Priscilla, this world was not her home, but it became important to her because it would be home to her music.

And I couldn't be happier.

The music was Hers.

This Family was Mine.

There were infinite versions of every one of my wives out there. One just had to look at this world to see examples of the sheer vastness of the multiverse.

I could watch a billion other Priscillas die and only feel a twinge of annoyance and melancholy at the sight.

I would torch the entire multiverse rather than watch Priscilla die.

That was what it meant to be Mine.

As I flailed against infinity, I would sink my claws deep into the small slice of the void that I could call my own.

Which made what happened today a particular annoyance to me.

"How are you?" I asked, my smile slipping from a grin to something softer. More genuine. "After the show and… Frost?"

"I am well," Priscilla said with her head tilted in question. "The performance was a success, was it not? No violence occurred, despite Ciara's appearance."

"I meant more about Frost stealing your thunder." When she looked even more confused, I explained the expression. "Today was supposed to be about you, no matter my plans. She made it about herself."

"Ah," Priscilla pursed her lips and nodded. "I understand. Thy fear is that I am displeased she took attention from me. I am not. I knew an incident might occur today, and my only hope was that my fans would not be hurt. Compared to a battle, a wench's desire to become Sir Bard's bride is a paltry annoyance."

While that was good to know Priscilla wasn't jealous, a few things stood out.

Like her use of the word 'wench' and how her tail tightened around my leg when she spoke it.

"So you aren't unhappy that Frost stole attention, and probably a headline or two, but something else," I noted, and when Priscilla went to say something, I simply raised a hand

to stop her. “Before you say anything about not being annoyed, I know you well enough to know something has you bothered.”

That, and her tail was the gravest traitor to ever sweep the earth if Priscilla wanted to keep her emotions a secret.

“T’is true,” Priscilla sighed as if admitting to a crime. “I am vexed by Lady Emma’s counterpart. Not because of her ‘stealing my thunder,’ as thee said, but because of her actions themselves.”

“What exactly pissed you off?” I asked curiously. I didn’t think my floofy wife was angry, just miffed or annoyed.

Miffed enough that her tail was drawing little daggers into my thigh.

“Her failure to control herself and the repercussions it shall have for thee.”

I blinked.

“You’re going to need to explain yourself on that one, babe,” I said dully. “It will be annoying to not have our connection to Frost remain a secret, sure, but that went out the window when she overtly supported your singing career. She just made the announcement more overt.”

“Nay. I speak of the potential for further declarations of courtship,” Priscilla said with a frown before hurrying to ‘reassure’ me. “If thou wish to take Emma Frost as wife or concubine, that is thy right. I know Sir Bard would never accept a lady into our Family without our approval. But what of the other thirsty sluts? How many will I now be forced to slay because of Lady Frost’s words? You know I dislike violence.”

My mouth literally fell open.

Has… has my floofy dragon been corrupted by the internet?

To hear words like ‘thirsty sluts’ from Priscilla… I didn’t know what to feel.

Actually, that’s not true. I thought it was absolutely hilarious. I just wanted to be the one to corrupt her.

But one question needed to be asked.

“Why would you be forced to kill women?” I asked, genuinely confused.

As far as I knew, joining my Family wasn’t some sort of battle royal. Was my hand in marriage some kind of prize to be won? And if it was, can I get a few tickets to the show?

I wanted to watch it.

And make a few bets.

“How else should one deal with ‘the bitches?’”

I don’t know what was funnier, the fact that Priscilla used the word ‘bitches’ or that she used air quotes around it.

“Make no mistake, my Lord,” Priscilla said primly. “I shall not harm Frost, nor any

other woman deemed worthy to pursue thee. I am not some jealous witch, hoarding thy love to myself. I shall merely defend thy honour from the lascivious women who would press upon thee unwelcome advances."

I couldn't help it.

I really couldn't.

I had tried hard, really I had, but I truly, one hundred percent, could not help it anymore.

I laughed.

I laughed loud and long. I laughed and laughed and laughed. I doubled over in mirth, raucous howls escaping me. I laughed so hard my face started to hurt, and then I laughed some more.

"Sir Bard?"

"Ahahaha," I continued to chuckle, desperately sucking down air. Not because I needed to breathe to live, but because you can't keep laughing without air in your lungs. "Oh man, hahaha, oh jeez, haha, I needed that. I really needed that."

"Needed what?" Priscilla looked genuinely confused, even a little pouty. Which I also found funny. "What is so humorous?

"The idea that I'm the princess, heh, and you're my knight in shining armour," I half explained. No need to go over how her word choice affected me.

One of the best parts about Gap Moe is when they don't recognize the Gap Moe.

"Ah," her eyes widened, and she hurried to explain, tail shaking in anxiety. "I meant nothing by it, Sir Bard. Thy capabilities in defending thy own honour are beyond question. I merely suggest that because of Frost's words, thou shall now be inundated by those who seek to use thee for wealth, power, prestige or even thy body. It is our duty as thy wives to filter out the undesirables and deal with the intrigue of the palace."

Despite how cute I found her flustered appearance, I knew Priscilla was genuinely worried she had insulted me. Sometimes old shyness, insecurity, and plain social anxiety would paralyze the crossbreed, and she'd worry about giving offence when there was none.

I did the thing that always calmed her down.

I kissed her.

Priscilla's lips were cool and soft. Like silk left in the night air. She always ran a few degrees colder than humans, likely due to her draconic lineage.

Her eyes widened for an instant in surprise before she yielded to me. Her lips parted, allowing my tongue entrance. It wasn't a ravishing or a show of dominance but rather a slow exploration. Gentle but unyielding.

Her tail, wagging in anxiety only a second before, started moving in much happier patterns. It never moved like a dog's or a cat's, instead it slithered and slid along the ground.

Instead of the base connected to Priscilla moving, it was the tip that was most expressive. Right now, it was thumping out a rhythm in pleasure against my thigh.

I pulled away. My floofy dragon's gaze was glassy and lidded, mouth slightly open.

"You're too damn cute," I said softly, tucking a strand of long white hair behind her ear and brushing over her tiny horn-like eyebrows. Priscilla shivered in delight. "If you want to defend my honour and protect me from 'the bitches,' go right ahead. I just want to make sure you are happy."

"I am, Sir Bard," Priscilla said seriously, eyes refocusing. Her green-yellow draconic slits met my own firey orange. "I have been since I first heard thy music. It was a beauty I never knew existed, and now I shall share that with innumerable worlds. One woman's words shall not dampen my memory of it, my joy of it, nor my love for thee."

Gah. Instant diabetes.

Don't get me wrong, seeing Priscilla going a little yandere was definitely attractive to me. I always had a thing for dangerous women. But when she was full floofy dragon-wife, I lost.

I must spoil this darling creature. Right now.

"Eep!"

Priscilla made a cute noise of surprise as I picked her up in a bridal carry, her tail wrapping tightly around my leg in surprise. As reassurance, I gave her a peck between her brows as I carried her to her bed.

"Sir Bard?" Priscilla asked as I set her down gently, angling her so she was face down on the bed. She tilted her head to look at me as I sat beside her, her long white hair fanning out over her back and the bluish silver of her dress. I removed her tail from around my leg, holding it gently as I summoned my weapon of choice. "Hm? AH!"

Priscilla let out a gasping moan as I began to comb her tail.

I started from where the fluffy appendage met her lower back, carefully holding it as it tried to squirm away. It was very sensitive, I knew, but I would not be denied my fluffy time.

With dexterous, supernaturally skilled hands, I set to work.

Priscilla was a crossbreed. Not a dragon turned into a human or vice versa. Her heritage had seen her ostracized and banished, and even to this day, she still felt shy about her appearance.

Her tail was the most obvious marker of that heritage, that 'deformity' as her people

would call it.

When Priscilla was unshrunk, the fluffy appendage was the size of a grown man. The thick fur was incredibly soft and warm to the touch, but below it was skin covered in delicate white and silver scales.

Priscilla blushed and squirmed as I lavished gentle attention on her most inhuman trait. My comb softly glided through the most delicate of fur.

I knew she didn't have much confidence in her form. Knew she still was shy about her draconic traits. She still wore thick, furry robes when possible. Any excuse that she was cold was immediately disproven by the fact she walked around barefoot most of the time. If she wore robes that blended with the scales and fur on her skin, it served to slightly hide the parts of her body she had constantly been mocked for.

Centuries of ridicule and trauma would not go away just because I said I thought she was cute and beautiful or that I considered her draconic traits a bonus rather than a detriment.

I had to show her. Time and time again, I had to prove to Priscilla through my actions that I found her just as beautiful as every one of my other wives.

So we sat on her bed for minutes as I brushed and combed her tail.

Not a word was exchanged, despite my fluffiest wife occasionally letting out gasps or moans of pleasure.

I started to hum.

Not a song, specifically, just a light tune. A string of melodies without words as I worked.

Sticky Fingers guided me along my task. I wasn't using the perk to provide sexual relief or pleasure. That wasn't what this was about. I was using it to keep my hands steady, finding the knots and detangling them in the most relaxing way possible.

Priscilla finally relaxed under the gentle ministration of my hands and music. Her tail stopped squirming as all tension left her.

I kept combing the delicate fur, brushing it softly as I continued my floofy task.

I needed this as much as Priscilla did. Between the Phoenix Force, this shadowy 'Oppressor' figure, whatever Odin was up to, and the ongoing situation with Frost, it was nice to spend a quiet few minutes luxuriating in fluffy tails and their wonder. I'd talk with Frost tomorrow.

Tonight was all about Priscilla.

I did not pause my hands or voice for over half an hour. I made sure every inch of my wife's tail felt my attention. Not a single strand of fur was unaligned. Not one scale wasn't rubbed gently till it gleamed under the light of the moon streaming through the window.

When I was finally done with the last little part of the sensitive tip, my wife was a puddle of relaxed bliss on the bed, her tail a limp limb of fluffy delight.

I looked upon my work with pride.

But I wasn't done yet.

"Sir… Bard?" Priscilla said slowly, eyes lidded in relaxed pleasure as I moved.

"Shh," I whispered gently into her ear as I gently grabbed her dress and Freed it from her body.

I was careful not to tear it, as Priscilla really loved the thing, so it just passed through my wife like she wasn't there, and I set it aside on a nearby table.

I looked upon my naked wife with love and desire as she lay prone on her bed.

Her skin was a snow white, matching her fur and scales. Those marks of her crossbreed status only made her more appealing to my eyes. A very thin film of fur-trimmed her sides and lower back, less than a finger thick. Scales, almost imperceptibly small, lined the sides where fur met flesh on her upper back and around her waist. The tiniest of draconic ridges, white and curved, jutted from her spine and shoulders like small little horns.

While Priscilla was gigantic in the absolute sense of the word, her assets fit her frame more modestly than some of my other wives. Her breasts, pressed into the bed as she lay on her stomach so I could only see a hint of a pale nipple, were a handful when I matched her height but nowhere near the mammary mountains of Artoria or Tsunade. Her butt, half covered by her limp tail, was a lovely peach shape but was not the dump truck of an ass like Yoruichi's or the sculpted cheeks of Diana.

Not a warrior queen, a heroine of battle, or a matronly beauty, Priscilla looked like a princess.

Not thin and frail, like so many princesses in towers, but delicate. Lovely. A woman in a dream. Like a painting given life.

She was beautiful.

I stepped Free of my clothes, letting them fall to the ground in a crumpled heap as I rejoined my princess on the bed.

"Hmmmm," Priscilla let out a low hum of pleasure as I kissed along her neck, my hands ghosting through the thin layer of fur along her sides. They fell on her pale breasts as I gently kneaded the delicate flesh without making her move. "Ah! Sir Bard! Please!"

Were this most of the others, I would tease and prod. I'd force them to beg further, winding them up with either the power dynamic, their masochistic or submissive desire, or playing on their various fetishes to heighten their pleasure while also tickling my own sadistic tendencies.

Not with Priscilla.

I only kissed her gently, lovingly, as I gently ran my fingers down her back ridge, sending shivers along her spine. I carefully grabbed the base of her tail, firmly but delicately moving it up and to the side as I positioned myself.

Then I entered her.

“Mmmmm,” Priscilla moaned into my lips as I filled her up, covering her with my body as she lay prone on the bed. One hand held me up, allowing me to kiss her over her shoulder, while the other held her tail safely to the side as it started to really squirm with pleasure.

This was not our first time together, but the feeling of Priscilla around me was as indescribable as ever.

It was slightly cooler than the rest of my wives, just like the rest of her body, but the temperature was the least of the differences. There was a tightness to her that was literally inhuman, a thin layer of scales around her edge that squeezed my base as tightly as a snake. Her insides were equally unique. As if a million tiny fibers worked my length at once instead of a regular woman’s kegle muscles.

It was a unique but incredibly pleasurable experience.

It took supernatural strength to slowly pull myself back till only my tip remained within her. Priscilla was wet, incredibly so thanks to so much time floofing her tail, no matter how much I focused on relaxing her instead of giving sexual pleasure.

It was the tightness of her entrance that made it so difficult as if she would allow anything in the world but my escape.

I sank back into her just as slowly, gritting my teeth from the pressure and the pleasure it brought. Her tail fought to escape my grasp, and I let it. It wrapped around my waist and tried to pull me in faster, to sink deep into Priscilla and never leave.

I didn’t allow that.

I bottomed out, my tip kissing the tip of her womb as my hips met her cheeks, distending them as I pressed down with my weight.

“Auuh,” Priscilla moaned low, releasing my lips as I held myself in her depths, her body shuddering.

I repeated the process. Slowly. Inevitably. Lovingly. I withdrew myself from her till only the bare minimum remained engulfed before returning my dick to where it belonged, just as slowly.

This was not fucking, the frenetic colliding of bodies and dirty words and actions in the search of pleasurable release.

This was lovemaking. Unifying two bodies, hearts, and souls in as intimate a way as

possible.

With my slow movements, I felt every millimetre of her. Priscilla felt every inch of me.

We danced a dance as old as life itself.

It was slow. It was languid. It was wonderful.

Priscilla found her release a half dozen times, her tail letting me know precisely when she achieved orgasm by the way it would go absolutely wild around me. Her body shuddered as she moaned, spasming around me, her fur and scales undulating in hypnotic patterns as she found her release.

Through it all, I remained there. In her. Over her. Around her.

I engulfed her as she did me, never letting her forget for even a moment that I was there.

That I loved her.

My own release came when I could bear her shuddering orgasms no longer. When her moans, her skin, her everything became too much for my heart and body to endure any longer.

I kissed her as I came, our lips meeting in a slow, gentle embrace as I flooded her depths. Her tail told me she had once again found her peak as it flailed against me with spasmatic joy.

Our lips separated as I pulled myself from her clenching depths, rolling onto my back and pulling her onto my chest so that her tail wouldn't be pressed into an uncomfortable position.

We didn't say a word, just laying in each other's arms, my hands gently running through her fur and scales as I hummed a low tune.

Priscilla joined me.

Her melodic voice joined my deeper rumbling as we held each other and made music together.

Author's Note:

You thought it was another PHO chapter, but it was I! Lovey-dovey smut!

Obviously, this takes place after Obsession 2 and before Obsession 3. I'll place it between them later for future readers, but for now, here they are. I wanted to at least show a bit of the impact of that day for those unaware of the currents below the surface.

As we draw nearer the end and things ramp up, I don't want to lose focus on the quiet moments. The tender touch. Yes, things can reach low points in the story, but I never want it to drown in the darkness. Just like life, there are points of light, small moments of joy, everywhere if we care to look.

Priscilla has half fallen through the cracks of this story, just as few other women have. I try to give them time to shine, but this story already pushes over 600k words. The simple fact is not everybody will get equal screen time.

I started RR as an attempt to make a whole story out of a half-backed Waifu Catalogue short. My character writing has gotten better over the year and a half, but unless I want the plot to drag on more than it already is, I will have to cut some things out. But I never want to forget the characters themselves, even if I don't show them.

The next few releases will also be Side Stories, and we will be back with the next part of Volume 3 after Christmas. I will see you all next week.

SIDE STORY VI: LOST WORLD

"Alas, regardless of their doom, the little victims play! No sense have they of ills to come, nor care beyond today."
-Thomass Gray

"It's jumbled," Melina said as she set down a broken piece of coral. It was fashioned into a necklace of sorts but had been shattered long ago. "I am a Dragon of Fire. These feel too much like the sea."

"The psychometry should come from the Phoenix Force, not your Element," Nico Robin asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It is through my Element that I can be a host," Melina said as she ghosted her hands over the other remnants Robin had laid out for her. "Everything I do is channelled through Fire. These are too tied to water. I cannot see anything clearly."

That was disappointing.

When Robin heard about Melina's ability to see the past through objects, she immediately realized its potential in archeology.

Since they had some downtime after the convention, Robin dragged the Kindling Maiden to her study, where she kept the samples of Atlantian civilization that she had… borrowed from various museums worldwide.

Once a pirate, always a pirate.

Nami would be proud.

The familiar pang of sadness at the memory of her fellow Strawhat flowed through Robin as she turned things over in her mind.

Strictly speaking, with what they knew about Poseidon, Robin was almost sure the destruction of Atlantis had been caused by this 'Oppressor.' After that, any remnants in the ocean had been 'Freed' by her husband, unintentionally whipping out all clues that had been buried in the waves.

It would be easy to leave things there.

Robin never took the easy answers in her search for the truth of history.

Was Poseidon turned before or after Atlantis' destruction?

Why was it destroyed? How was it destroyed?

And why the long time between its disappearance and the advent of Endbringers if the enemy controlled them? The last record of the underwater city was decades ago.

At least Robin had a hypothesis about why its study had fallen out of favour despite proof of its existence. The enemy didn't want people looking too closely at its

disappearance.

Which made her study of it even more critical.

If somebody wanted history to be forgotten, they'd have to do it over Robin's dead body.

But, without further leads, she was at a dead end.

Until Melina became the Phoenix Host.

"Not even from this," Robin asked Melina as she led to the most important part of her collection.

It was a half-broken trident, rusted and calcified from the years and salt spray. Faint Greek lettering was carved into the distorted sides of the metal.

Thanks to the catalogue, Robin could read it as well as any language, so she knew it wasn't a really coherent sentence. Parts had been worn away over time, and the damage the weapon received.

Robin had roughly translated it as '- last - dying — sight.'

She had hoped it was some sort of record of the end of Atalantis, but Medea had said it wasn't a magical weapon. She had also explained that it could just be an epitaph on a soldier's weapon, a reasonably common tradition from her time in case warriors fell in battle.

Still, maybe Melina could get something from it. It was the last item to wash ashore decades ago that could be reliably attributed to the fallen city.

"I…" Melina paused as she stared at the broken weapon before shaking her head. "Even less than the others. I can't see anything."

Very frustrating.

"Why don't you tell me how you use your Element," Robin tried. "We might be able to find a workaround."

If there was one thing the Family had learned about their Elements, it was how incredibly subjective and fluid they were. Their exact manifestation was wholly dependent on the way of thought of their owners.

Tsunade thought of 'Life' as all life forms connected through spiritual channels because of her experience with chakra. This led to her gaining Sage Mode as the primary manifestation of her element and Wood Release as a byproduct.

On the other hand, Mikael saw 'Life' as the struggle to stay alive. His ability was way more limited but more powerful. If he was touching something, it could not die if he didn't allow it.

Robin's own Element 'Flower' was obviously a manifestation of her Devil Fruit, but it also represented her struggle for survival over everything life had thrown at her, similar to

Mikael's Life Element. So long as one 'flower,' or clone of her, lives, she can regrow. It had removed the concept of a 'main' body for her. All of Robin's limbs and copies were just petals on one flower. It was why not even Mikael going at full power could kill her.

Flowers would always bloom again.

'Fire' was such a broad concept that Robin was betting there was some wiggle room for them to try and work out a way for Melina to get something from all this.

"I see things in fire," Melina said with a shrug. "Things that were burned or warmed by the flame."

"So both destruction and a form of creation? No, closer to 'aid' or 'blessing' rather than creation?"

"Something of the sort. Shall we ask Medea or Scathach for aid?" Melina offered. "Or Emma."

"Emma's with Mikael," Robin shook her head. "They went to talk to Frost. And we can ask the others if we don't work something out. I think we can, though. These conceptual elements are not too dissimilar to some of my world's more esoteric Devil Fruits. Remind me to talk to you about my captain and his… unique abilities sometimes. For now, why don't you tell me how you use Fire with the Phoenix's psychic abilities."

"I burn things," Melina deadpanned.

"I guessed as much," Robin chuckled. Every once in a while, Mikael's influence on the woman shown through clearly. "What do you burn, how do you burn it, and how does it help you with your psychic powers?"

"I picture a fire in my mind," Melina said with a frown. "I feed it everything I don't want to sense. Mostly thoughts of the people around me."

"And the people themselves? Do you sense them? What about actual fires? I can't sense flowers, but I know Scathach can feel any blood spilled within a few miles of her."

"I feel people," Melina nodded. "But that is from the Phoenix Force sensing their psychic waves. I only visualize them as flames. I do feel fires, but they are like stars in the sky. I only notice if I am concentrating on them."

"Hmm," Robin gently turned over a piece of decorative shell. Once, it would have had ink depicting various scenes; now, it was little more than a carved surface with vague humanoid figures. "If you feel fires, can you feel where fire once was? Or where fire touched."

"Possibly," Melina said hesitantly. "But that will not aid us here. They lived under the ocean."

"But they needed light of some form," Robin said. "And heat. A civilization cannot exist without the ability to perceive the world around it. Unless they all operated by

echolocation, which Emma and Diana said their versions of Atlantis did not, they had to have some way of perceiving their world. Bioluminescence, magic, electricity, or some other form of light and heat needed to exist for them to shape these tools. Can you try to sense the heat on these?"

Without a word, Melina took up the broken trident once more and closed her eyes.

"I can sense the heat of light," she said with a frown. "The sun. Then, something more artificial. Lightbulbs. I see faces and gloved hands."

"That is probably from when it surfaced and was studied by archeologists," Robin nodded. "Can you try and go further back? Focus more on the heat that shaped it. It's metal, which likely means it was melted at some point. Focus on that."

"I…" Melina paused, her frown deepening. "I can feel heat, but I can't see fire. I still feel the water. Water and pressure and heat."

Robin cast her thoughts to the mystery. How had an underwater civilization developed tools? The light could come from the sun or bioluminescent animals and coral, but how had they shaped metal? Medea had not sensed any magic, so it had to be some natural process.

Boiling water?

"Try this," Robin suggested. "Don't think about fire as you know it. Think of magma. Beneath everything is immeasurable heat. The Earth's core, mantle, and all the lava it produces. It shifts, rising and falling in currents like water. Fire under stone. Heat is trapped by rock and caused by pressure. Always moving beneath the surface. It will eventually escape, even under the ocean, and it will boil the water of the sea floor."

Like how Robin's education in atomic theory had allowed her to grow her limbs without anchors, she hoped knowledge of the Earth's crust and mantle would help Melina visualize 'fire beneath the earth.'

Her words took hold.

Melina let out a grunt of pain as she stumbled back.

"What is it?" Robin asked eagerly. "Did you see anything?"

"Not the way you hope for," Melina said, taking a deep breath. "I felt the Earth. The fire and the stone. They are as one down there. Bleeding into each other. And they had a presence. Two psychic entities. One is as solid as the ground, and one is as effervescent as a flame. Were it not for the Defences, they would also have sensed me."

It took Robin a moment to realize what Melina was probably talking about. Mikael had given them a brief rundown of the Parliaments after the incident with Ciara.

"Those were probably the Parliaments of Stones and Flames," the pirate sighed in disappointment. "But nothing from the artifact?"

“Let me try again,” Melina said, closing her eyes. “The Earth’s flame surprised me, but I have known fires much greater than it. It shall not distract me again.”

There was silence in Robin’s study for a long moment as Melina concentrated.

“I… feel something,” Melina said lowly. “I see the trident being made. It was heated and shaped in a volcano under the sea, but not with magma or lava. It would taint the metal. A blacksmith of sorts shapes it with a hammer and magic. He is not human, though he looks like one. This trident was one of hundreds. All the same. Soldiers weapons.”

Robin was writing everything down in her notebook, eyes gleaming.

Mass-produced weaponry might not seem as special as a unique or distinct weapon, but it tells a lot about the culture that produces it. For example, the choice of a trident could have religious connotations, but the fact that it was a standard issue meant that it was also a practical choice and indicated a centralized authority.

It was also made entirely of metal instead of having a wooden shaft, which indicated a high level of metallurgy, considerable material wealth, and a robust infrastructure that allowed the transportation of material from one location to another. It also pointed to a unique technological development path, where wood would be rarer and less useful than metal because of the water.

Did it help with this Oppressor? Maybe not, but learning about history was never a bad thing, and you never knew what could be a clue.

“Anything else?”

“No. It all goes dark and wet from there.”

“What about the inscription? Can you read the full thing?”

“It…” Melina paused. “It wasn’t there during creation. It was added later. But I can’t see how.”

Then, the soldier likely carved it into the metal by hand at a later point. Atlanteans had a form of super strength, didn’t they?

“I can feel something else,” Melina said with a frown. “The sun again, but briefer. The weapon is being held by a soldier, and they are on land. A guard. A diplomatic meeting. With the Amazons, I recognize Hippolyta. The trident belonged to a royal guard of some sort. But it only saw the sun for a few hours before it returned to the sea. Then…” Melina shook her head.

“Can you tell how long ago the meeting was? And did it have the inscription when the meeting happened?”

“I cannot, and it did not.”

“Anything else?”

“No. Just water and pressure and darkness. I cannot even see when it broke.”

Still disappointing, but it's a good starting point.

Robin paused as a thought struck her. If the inscription had been an epithet or way of identifying ownership, the soldier would likely have carved it relatively soon after receiving the weapon.

It was too early to say anything with certainty, but it could be related to the fall of Atlantis after all.

"Let's go over the rest of my collection," the pirate said, switching pages in her notes to categorize things appropriately. "Once you have more practice, maybe you can get more out of it."

Melina shrugged, going along with Robin's study without complaint.

Robin and Melina didn't have time to go through the entire collection before they were called away by their husband being accused of kidnapping a baby, but they weren't entirely without results.

Over the next few minutes, the archeologist learned more about the daily life of the average Atlantean, but nothing that helped shine a light on the destruction of the underwater civilization.

But that told Robin its own story.

Everything they found indicated that Atlantis had been flourishing. Rich in materials, food, and populace, it had not been declining in the slightest. Then, it went completely silent, with no calls for help or awareness of its disappearance by the larger world.

The end, however it had come for the lost city, had been sudden and violent.

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Emma Frost shuddered, writhing in ecstasy.

It was all she could do to wait for Mikael to leave her office before she completely lost control of herself.

Being so close to Him, being His sole focus of attention, of His rage…

The memory of it had her spasming.

Heartbreak had been the best thing to ever happen to her.

Everything before had been… dull. Muted. Empty.

She gathered riches, power, and influence, but Frost never cared for it. It was simply something to do.

Ambition for ambition's sake.

Now?

Now Emma Frost had a purpose. A mission.

For those few fleeting seconds when she had been one with the Elden Lord, she had been *everything*.

It had been rapturous.

Emma Frost needed that again.

She needed it like she needed air or water.

To discard this flesh sack, this confinement of mortality and weakness, and become one with Him.

Frost would do anything for that. She'd make his little pet a star. She'd bounce his happy little sluts on his dick as much as he wanted. She'd debase herself in front of the whole world.

Emma Frost would force the world to bow to Mikael if it meant she could be with him.

He could have taken her then, right in her office, and all she would have felt was ecstasy.

For so long, she had been sleepwalking. A mindless sack of waste going through the motions.

Heartbreak had woken her up.

Meeting Him, touching Him, had shown her what she was missing.

Colour. Emotion. *Life*.

The exquisite sense of fear as His draconic eyes judged her. The thrill of excitement at the possibilities of what he could do. Hope, lust, envy, pride, so many emotions that had dulled had come roaring back into her life.

They were but a taste of what could be.

What would be.

Emma Frost would be Mikael's next consort.

She wouldn't allow anything else.

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Mikael was an absolute madman, Valeria thought to herself as she hummed—a true monster.

The pre-teen giggled to herself at the memory of their talk on the phone.

Mikael had been so angry when she asked if he had taken Nathan Summers, like Valeria had insulted him with the idea he would kidnap a baby. Which, to be fair, was a reasonably wild thing to ask anyone.

Except Mikael.

Valeria's giggles continued as she continued to work.

The silly dragon didn't seem to understand the irony of immediately thinking up a scenario to justify something you were being falsely accused of. He said he'd never kidnap a baby, but Valeria knew he was wrong.

Mikael would do absolutely anything.

He just had to have the right motivations, and he'd betray his morals, fears, and beliefs. Not only would Mikael kidnap babies, but he would gleefully throw them into an active volcano if he thought he needed to. He was only held back by things because he allowed himself to be.

Valeria knew the type.

Uncle Doom was like that. A monster.

Valeria wanted to be a monster.

She was already halfway there, Valeria told herself. She was a self-made madwoman. Sure, it was temporary, but Rome wasn't built in a day… unless it was.

Valeria took a second to contemplate the impact of magic, mutations, and possibly alien intervention in history.

She took three more seconds to compose a short, fifty-page essay on the possible influence of foreign life forms on humanity's development, listing the proper research papers that supported her hypothesis.

Valeria would write it out later, once she wasn't arms-deep in her most recent invention.

Valeria returned her thoughts to her ally.

Mikael, his false accusations, and what it meant for her situation.

In the end, Valeria decided she could do nothing now, so she banished it from her mind.

It was easy not to worry about things when you are physically incapable of having worries.

Instead, Valeria thought about happier topics.

Like how she could become a monster.

The easy answer would be to get Mikael to turn her into a dragon and gain power that way.

His ability to grant powers was the greatest she had ever heard of. Not just because everyone she knew who received it was increadibly powerful, but because of how reliable it was.

All other paths to power Valeria was aware of were incredibly conditional or based on chance. Yes, she could turn herself into a cyborg or genetically modify herself, but the

odds of it going wrong, even with her prodigal intellect, were too high to risk. The same problem with some sort of Iron Man suit. Without it, she'd be just as weak as ever.

No, Mikael was Valeria's path to becoming a monster.

The problem with becoming a monster that way was that, as far as she was aware, Mikael was increadibly leary about offering that power. The only person not married to him to whom he had granted powers was Glory Girl, and even then, it had been a discount version without the draconic power.

So then, why hadn't he?

Valeria pondered the question as she set about tweaking the formula to get it juuuuuusssssstttttt right.

Didn't want to start a zombie apocalypse on accident, after all.

There had to be some cost to the power. That was obvious. And the greater the power Mikael gave, the greater the cost. But what was it? Was it a one-time fee or something that needed to be paid over and over? And who paid, Mikael or the recipient?

"Questions, questions, questions," Valeria laughed. "A monster of questions. That's what I'll be. What about you all? What type of monster would you be?"

As always, the bodies on the bed never answered her. Her family remained as silent as the grave, as they had for years.

But that was fine.

Valeria couldn't feel sad about it anyway.

A shift of perspective. That was what Valeria needed. She could discover the price when Mikael offered her power if she could only discover how to get him to offer it.

Unfortunately, the most obvious answer was impossible.

Valeria couldn't be like Emma Frost. Valeria had years before she could attract romantic attention from the dragon if she decided that was the path to pursue. Everything she had observed showed that Mikael held zero attraction to her. He clearly preferred mature women.

Which was good. For a lot of reasons. But it did leave Valeria in a loop on how to convince the dragon to turn her into a monster.

Sure, they were allies, but so far, Valaria hadn't brought anything to the table. She needed him more than he needed her. That was obvious after Mikael had almost left their reality not too long ago, and there was nothing Valeria said or did that convinced him otherwise.

The little girl was physically incapable of feeling the emotional pain of betrayal, but Valeria certainly hadn't been as happy as she would have been if that hadn't happened.

The space flight had been fun, though.

Still, it was the perfect example of why Valeria wanted to be a monster.

Monsters had options. They had power. They were the ones who could change things.

A monster could be good or evil, rich or poor, alone or with family, all on their whim.

Not like Valeria.

For years, she had changed nothing despite her best efforts. Even if she wanted to become a villain, it would not accomplish anything.

Valeria's intellect, inventions, and planning did not save her family or the world. She had needed to ask a monster for help.

She had just been lucky enough to get the right kind of monster.

The type of monster with a treasure. A dragon with a hoard.

Now, how did Valeria become part of that hoard?

That was the question the twelve-year-old girl asked herself as she created a self-replicating nanomachine that targeted all cell structures and could spread through the air.

It would wipe all life from the planet in hours if it was ever released.

It was Valeria's forty-seventh doomsday weapon.

Just like Mikael, she could not recognize the irony of her own position.

Only a madwoman would destroy a world rather than letting their enemy gain control of it.

Valeria Richards laughed, giggled, and smiled as she contemplated how to become something she already was.

******

He was a god of nothing.

A king of a sleeping kingdom.

A father without children.

Odin dragged his feet along the ground of his hall in Asgard. The illusion he had cast upon himself for the Phoenix Force was dissolved around him. He didn't have the strength left to keep it up. And it took with it the mindset he had forced upon himself.

He barely paid attention to the guards, sleeping slumped against the wall. He paid even less attention to the decorations that lined the walls. Trophies from when he was younger.

Odin was an old god.

And he felt every minute of his age as he lethargically put one foot in front of the other.

He hadn't been this weak in… ever.

Odin had never been this… mortal.

No. That was the wrong word. Odin had walked as a mortal before. He had lived among them, suffered as a mortal and even died as a mortal.

Odin had never been this alone- this hopeless.

The vigour of youth. The hope of naivete. When had he lost it?

When had Odin discovered the end of his world?

When Thor returned and Odin realized something was off with his son?

When the changes spread, Odin saw his people fall under foreign sway?

Or was it when Odin tore out his one good eye, not for the wisdom it could grant, but to save himself?

So that he would not lose what made him 'Odin' and not another of the enemy's countless puppets and victims.

Odin had known war. He knew death and loss and betrayal and pain.

But this?

This silence and darkness was the most terrible thing he had ever known.

Seeing nothing did not harm him.

Hearing nothing hurt him in ways he could not have imagined.

Odin wandered the quiet halls of Asgard. He could not see, but these passageways were as familiar to him as his own name.

There were no feasts.

There were no brawls.

There was no laughter to ring out through the gilded realm of the gods.

It was quiet as every god slept in this graveyard of what was once a great people.

No one was awake to see the shuffling of the blind god as he made his way through halls he could not see.

Odin was alone. The last of the Council of Godheads. The last Asgardian.

The last god of Earth.

And he had failed.

The Odinforce was spent in the casting of the great spell that kept his people in their slumber.

He had sacrificed his final eye to protect himself from the enemy.

His personal reserves had been used in his supplication to the Phoenix Force.

Had Odin succeeded in becoming the host, he would have won. He had gambled it all on the possibility of healing his people for a great counterattack.

Odin had gambled and lost.

He had lost as soon as the Phoenix made its choice.

Odin had nothing left.

Nothing but a sleeping kingdom he would soon join.

The Odinsleep called.

Should he awake from it, he would be revitalized. Odin would be able to call upon the Odinforce once more.

The wise god knew he would never wake.

The enemy had claimed every other realm of gods, glutting itself on their power as they were destroyed from within. Asgard alone was spared because Odin's wisdom had prompted his quick action. Without the Allfather, nothing would protect his people from its grasp.

Odin's empty eyesockets felt so heavy.

Was this to be it? The King of Asgard asked himself. Was this to be how his people perished?

Not in glorious battle in Ragnarok, but as sleeping lambs waiting for slaughter?

There would be no Gotterdamerung.

Twilight had already long passed, and only a long night loomed ahead.

Odin cursed the Elden Lord. A prophesized doom was a surety. A comfort. The loss of that certainty of purpose led to fear and doubt.

Odin cursed the enemy. Patience, wisdom, power, and a hunger for control that would devour everything. A foe he wanted to face in battle yet never would.

As he feebly lifted himself into position for his last sleep, Odin cursed himself.

For failing his people. For not being the king they needed. For not having the strength to save the world.

Finally, as Odin's consciousness faded, his last conscious thought was not a curse but a prayer.

Not to anyone or anything else, for he was the last god of Earth. There was nothing left to pray to.

It was as much a wish as a prayer.

A wish to wake up once more, to see another day so that he might right wrongs. A wish for his people, for the Earth, and for all of the universe.

A wish for a better tomorrow.

Asgard was quiet as all life within slept through the world's end.

Author's Note:

Not gonna lie; I've had the week from hell, and this chapter suffered for it. On top of travelling internationally for a few days for work, a process that kept me in the car for over thirty hours, I ended up stranded and had to sleep in my car, which led to me getting sick.

That is why it is much shorter than I prefer, even for Side Stories. They are all designed to be a flushing out of the world and characters, but I prefer to have them be longer to go a bit deeper.

But I refuse to break my streak. Consistency is one of the reasons I have been able to write over 600k words in a year and a half. Breaking it now, so close to the end, would feel like giving up.

I wanted this to be longer, but I decided to go with less and more with this one. A tonal feel rather than direct exposition. A way to touch base with various characters, answer a few questions and set up the rest of the story.

After I get some sleep (and stop shaking from exhaustion), I plan to release a few Omakes for a more cheerful Christmas. I hope you look forward to it and everyone stays safe out there. We live in troubled times, but in moments like this, humanity's finest can shine through.

Merry Christmas and a happy holiday to everyone.

Dream

DREAM I

“Life is a dream for the wise, a game for the fool, a comedy for the rich, a tragedy for the poor.”
-Sholom Aleichem

My appreciation for my shadowy opponent’s move lasted less than an instant.

Time for damage control.

“Keep Ehangwen up,” I told Artoria. She judged the moment’s seriousness by my face because she nodded and didn’t question me.

Melina sent me a look, and I signalled her with my eyes that we’d talk in a moment as I pulled out my phone.

I rarely had to call anyone, the joys of teleporting and telepathy, but I did have a few numbers saved.

He answered before the first ring ended.

“Elden Lord.”

“How much of that did you get?” I asked Batman.

“All of it.”

Then, apart from his obvious communication device with Superman, there were probably a few less obvious cameras on some of the other heroes.

“Are you getting anything from their end?”

“No. And our psychic lost contact as well.” So Xavier couldn’t reach his students.

“I am going to assess the situation,” I said, not bothering with any other questions. “Deal with the PRT and any other heroes. I will be back.”

It said something about the magnitude of the situation that I didn’t even do my Schwarzenegger impression when I said those last words.

“Danger?”

“Potentially apocalyptic.”

“I want all the information.”

“If we’re lucky, I’ll give it over drinks,” I tried to laugh. “After we get Supes back, of course.”

It came out somewhat forced.

“If not?”

“… Deal with your end,” I said instead of answering. “If anyone gets in my way, I will crush them. You will thank me for it.”

“… Good luck.”

He hung up.

'Give me an image.'

Emma complied, and the entrance to Sinister's pocket world appeared in my head.

"We're leaving," I told Artoria and Melina, holding out my hands to them. They each grabbed one.

"What of the heroes?" Artoria asked. Her face was set into the severe frown she got when worried or displeased. Some of them had been her friends, or at least on friendly terms with her during her time as a Superhero.

"A secondary priority," I answered.

I felt terrible, I really did, but if all that happened today was the death of everyone who had been in this Hall except for us, the entire planet would have gotten off easy.

If Sinister was really releasing Beast Blood to the world…

I didn't bother to think about it as the Noble Phantasm faded around us, and I teleported us away.

We reappeared in an alleyway somewhere in South America, and Emma greeted us, standing over the unconscious bodies of Madelyne Pryor and Mystique.

"The others are still cleaning out the facility," the White Queen said immediately, knowing my mood. "It's a mess. And huge. We have the child, and Ranni is keeping Sinister occupied. He is… you will need to see for yourself."

"Artoria," I ordered. "Bring these two to the Island and place them in cells. The comfortable ones, at least for now, but I don't want them to be able to leave their rooms. Melina, here's my phone. Get Valeria on the line and see if she has something that will pull data from this place, like the device we used the other day, but stronger. I want every scrap of data. If Sinister wiped his ass with his left hand, I want to know about it."

Artoria was already slinging the woman over her shoulders as Melina wrinkled her nose in disgust at the mental image. Before they left, the host of the Phoenix Force looked at me and asked the question I didn't want to answer.

At least not now.

"What is going on?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly.

I had no idea how Sinister had gotten a hold of Maneating Boars, how long he had them, what he had been doing with them, or if the medicine Superman had mentioned, 'Sanguine,' was what I feared it was.

I could be overacting. Emma could be wrong. The scale could be much lower than I feared.

I hoped I was wrong. I couldn't pray to anyone but myself, but pray I did that this was

just another bout of paranoia.

Because if it wasn't, if things were really as bad as I expected, I had doomed this entire universe. If I wanted to save it, I'd have to…

"I will explain everything when I have all the information," I said instead of giving empty words.

That seemed to mollify them for the moment as Artoria stepped through the pale white portal to the Island with our prisoners, and Melina pulled up my phone to call my pint-sized mad scientist.

"Will you?" Emma asked.

While every one of the original ten women had been summoned to Bloodborne at least once and seen a hint of that terrible place, only Emma knew the full extent of what I had done.

What had needed to be done.

"I am not ashamed of what happened," I answered grimly. "I never pretended to be a hero. I am just me."

We entered Sinister's lab together, and I was assaulted by the familiar smell of blood.

The entrance was clean and sterile, as I would expect of a scientific lab.

Before anything else, I took my wife's hand in mine, Freeing her mind from its limits.

Emma didn't need me to say anything as she immediately bypassed all mental defences and shut down anyone with a hint of a mind. Human, monster, animal, it didn't matter. With nothing able to stop her, Emma Frost killed every living thing in this pocket world with even a hint of thought.

No. Not everything.

We needed answers, and I trusted her to help me get them. I could not force the truth from the dead.

The living, however…

It took less than ten seconds of walking for the sterile white walls to disappear under the brown and red of blood and death.

My Family had torn through this place like a meat grinder. Bodies littered the floor. Blood dripped from walls and ceilings. Grooves from blades, fists, and spells were more common than lightbulbs.

A charnel house of blood and death.

A grim reminder that even my most heroic wives were still warriors well acquainted with death.

I could understand their brutality. While Diana would go to great lengths to keep civilians safe, she wasn't the type to hold back on foes. Combine it with the fact that these

weren't living people but clone soldiers bred for war, mutated almost beyond recognition, and there was little reason for her or the rest of the Family to hold back.

Bodies were pierced into walls by spears.

Bodies bent cruelly as their bones were contorted in unnatural directions.

Bodies burned, crushed, frozen, stabbed, and all manner of other methods of death.

Hundreds of corpses, possibly thousands, lined these halls. Sinister had an army here, all made up of clones of the same two dozen or so mutants. I recognized a good chunk of them, Marauders of various iterations of comics.

It was not the death that disturbed me. I had seen and done far worse in my day.

It was the bodies themselves.

A clone of Harpoon with cloven hooves.

A clone of Blockbuster that was bloated like a sickly pig.

A clone of Riptide with snakes for limbs.

Scalphunter with a bulging red belly.

An unfamiliar mutant without a head, just a brain on a stem. Its half-dozen eyes of various sizes stared blankly at the ceiling.

Another Riptide, this one with normal limbs but with a beard of tentacles, still writhing, even in death.

The top half of Scrambler, with sickly black crow wings and blank white eyes.

A woman I didn't recognize looked almost human, except for the extra arms, legs, breasts, and heads.

Vertigo hung from the ceiling, clawed arms dangling lifelessly as her blood dripped from her slit neck. Her only abnormality was that she was twice the size of an average person.

A version of Mystique without the collar was embedded in a wall. One would expect the vertically slit chest to be her cause of death, but I knew the truth. I saw the fangs along the 'wound' and knew this monster was closer to a DND mimic by way of Lovecraft than any humanoid.

The fourth and seventeenth Scrambler corpses both had hunched back and lupine features.

I counted seven versions of the unknown woman that had grown a bulbous insect head.

That was nothing compared to the sheer number of Ooze's that littered the halls. I only knew they had initially been versions of Mystique because of the coloration and the texture of their 'skin.' Her biology must have been particularly conducive to Sinister's experiments.

Walking hand in hand, Emma and I wandered through this alien yet too familiar scene.

The robots, the guns, and the futuristic labs were all new to me.

The carnage was not.

It was like an old nightmare, one you tried to forget but always tugged at the edge of your senses.

The gore, the smell, the viscera, it all called back to dark alleys under a paleblood moon.

It called back to a city consumed by a plague, where roving gangs of mad men prowled the streets, drunk on the blood of monsters and innocents alike.

The flickering light of damaged screens reminded me of bonfires and boiling flesh and fur.

The narrow corridors were no longer the white and silver of metal but the brown of dirt and grey of stone.

I wasn't in the tight confines of an isolated world created by a mad geneticist with delusions of power.

I was in Chalice Dungeons, killing everything that lives as I made my way deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper. I was drowning in blood. I was pressed down by the floors I collapsed above me.

I was trapped by my own hand. I had destroyed every Lantern above ground, cutting off the Hunter's Dream as much as possible.

With every step I took, I dug deeper into my own tomb. This was going to be my grave. My greatest work. My worst sin.

The remains of Pthumeril, Isz, Loran and the Hintertombs. These remnants of once-great civilizations would be my mausoleum. Every monster would be my grave companion. Every drop of blood I spilled as I delved deeper was but another log on my pyre.

I was finally going to die.

Not to the blood and beast and plague and death but to Her. To one I loved. Was forced to love. To the one I had trusted and who had betrayed me.

I had died countless, countless times in more ways than I could remember. I had felt torture the likes of which no god could stand, and no man could survive, but this would be the last.

The true death.

The final death.

The death of self.

The End of ‘Me.’

I was… so tired.

Emma squeezed my hand.

I blinked.

When had we stopped? When had Emma turned her hand to diamond?

When had I become trapped again?

She looked at me, not saying a word.

Emma, my wife, traitor, and saviour. The woman who had seen everything I had ever done, the heroic and monstrous. Who understood me as well as Melina but knew me better and didn’t judge me for it.

Emma, who loved me.

Emma, who I loved.

“Thanks,” I said softly, placing my empty hand on hers and pulling Emma in for a small, chaste kiss.

We resumed walking as I reminded myself that I was Free.

This was not the Cell.

This was not the Kiln.

This was not Yharnam.

This was my happy ending.

I was Me. I was Free. I was Alive.

We started walking again, no longer rushing with hurried steps.

Speed wouldn’t help me here if I lost myself.

“It is my own home’s affliction,” I sang, my voice echoing through the bloody lab. “Behind bars within a cage. I’ve been marked the plague’s possession, and I’ve been locked in for days.”

As always, the music helped me think. Kept me centred and sane.

Emma didn’t say anything, letting me think, vent, and plan while she did the work.

“There’s a ruckus in the streets,
Those I begged to stay inside.
Soon the noise gives way to silence,
For a moonlit lullaby.”

First off, I had to acknowledge reality.

The Beast Blood had gotten out.

Some way, somehow, it had managed to leave my Island and make its way into the

world. I thought I had been thorough and well prepared, no creature should be able to pass from the inside out without my explicit permission. Something had gone wrong for Maneater Boars to be outside my personal dimension.

Which made whatever happened next my fault.

"Oh my mind, oh my mind,
Thoughts are fleeting all the time.
I feel bones begin to splinter,
As my fever starts to climb."

Not wholly my fault, of course. I wasn't the nincompoop who decided to go to the deadly Island, take the massive pig with twenty eyes, extract its blood and sell it as snake oil medicine.

Nor was I the idiot using a shady medicine named 'Sanguine' of all things that, coincidentally, looked like blood.

But it was the unmistakable truth that none of this… this mess would have been possible if I hadn't allowed people onto my Island to get bodies to experiment on to regain human form. If I had kept it locked down completely, I am sure this wouldn't have happened.

"Who's to blame, who's to blame,
For the blood that wrought this shame?
Now my ears have started ringing,
To a symphony of pain."

I had thought I was thorough.

I had thought I had taken precautions.

I thought I had been careful enough, if not too paranoid.

I had thought wrong.

Whatever happened next, it would be my fault.

So what would happen next?

"My blood's contagion,
Brings transfor-"

I didn't have time to dwell on my thoughts or continue the chorus as I was

interrupted.

“Hey!” Yoruichi greeted casually as she ran up beside us. “Things settled with the heroes?”

…Right. While Melina and Artoria had known how serious I was taking the situation, only Emma really knew how deep in shit we were.

I hadn’t hidden what I had done in Bloodborne, per se. My Family knew what sort of game it was, had seen fractions of it when summoned, and I had answered their questions without shame.

But I also hadn’t volunteered any information either.

As far as my other wives knew, Bloodborne was just another Fromsoft game where you killed monsters, died, re-spawned and did it all again. They knew that there was a blood-borne plague. It was in the name, after all, and it had something to do with my Avatar, my Great One status, and the nature of Insight and Frenzy.

As far as they were aware, the blood was dangerous, I was a cognito hazard, and that was it.

A profound sense of melancholy settled on me as I looked at Yoruichi.

I hoped that was all they needed to know, but if it wasn’t, I would be the one to handle it.

I just hoped it wasn’t necessary. I didn’t want my image in their mind tarnished in such a way.

How would Artoria look at me if she knew? Would Diana still trust me as much? Would Priscilla still call me Sir Bard?

None of my wives were delicate maidens. The carnage around me was proof enough of that. But…

“What is going on?” Yoruichi asked with narrowed eyes as she caught my expression.

She looked to Emma, and her suspicion rose again. It was easy to forget how playful she tended to be, but Yoruichi had been the captain of a squad of assassins and spies.

“I’ll explain everything at home,” I answered, shaking my head. I looked at Emma. “Can you have Medea join us?”

Yoruichi’s feline eyes watched me intently while Emma nodded. She really did make a great secretary.

“You dealt with all the clones, but there are portions of this place we haven’t covered,” Yoruichi eventually told me. Like Artoria and Melina, she trusted me to talk to them later. “Robots and the like.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said blandly. Medea appeared beside me in a swirl of her cloak. “Once I have Valeria strip this place of all its information, I am destroying this entire

dimension."

"I was hoping to study it," Medea said playfully, but I shook my head.

"I'll find you a better one."

First, fire and lightning to destroy even the tiniest drop of blood and render everything else down to ash. Then, I'd 'Free' it from its tether to Earth. Relatively easy to do when I knew where the doorway was. Finally, I'd poke my True Body in and cast my most powerful spell, a combination of Eternal Darkness, Collapsing Stars, and Gravity Well that I had simply named Singularity.

Magic Talent OP, plz, no nerf.

I'd regenerate the part of me that had to be in this reality to cast the spell after the black hole consumed it, and this pocket dimension would drift in the void between realities until it collapsed, completely empty and a death trap for anything that tried to enter it.

Despite the situation, the chance to actually use that stupidly impractical yet monumental spell was enough to put a smile on my face.

Sure, I needed to be careful not to accidentally kill myself with my own overpowered spell, and I couldn't really use it in a regular fight, but that just made it cooler.

And sure, I might have inadvertently aided in releasing an apocalyptic plague on Earth, but I also get to violate the laws of nature and physics.

Silver linings and all that.

"Ok," I said, slapping myself in the cheeks with both hands. My wives looked at me in confusion. Then, just to fuck with them, I also slapped my other cheeks. I've been told my ass is my best feature. Either that or my face. Supposedly, they were indistinguishable. "Ok, let's do this."

Emma rolled her eyes fondly while Yoruichi let out a cheer.

"Do what?" Medea asked with a smile.

"You are going to kill Sinister," I told her. "You said you had a curse that would target him and any clones he has in other places? How certain are you that it will get all of them?"

"Depending on his method of cloning, ninety percent or so," Medea said with pride. "Most 'clones' are the same person. Same soul, Origin, and Element, just fragmented over different bodies. It takes very unique circumstances for a clone to develop a unique soul and be considered a different 'person.'"

"I want you to be a hundred percent sure," I said seriously. "I don't just want this guy dead. I want him super mega ultra giga dead. So dead that his ancestors will die a second time. So dead that not even my jokes will make him deadpan."

My severe facade cracked, and I grinned.

“He’s a geneticist,” Medea sniffed disdainfully. “Even if his clones have developed unique souls, they will still have the same DNA. I will be able to find them and kill them as well. It will simply take three spells instead of one. Do not worry, dear. He will not survive.”

“Still angry about the baby-napping accusation?” Yoruichi grinned teasingly.

“Among other reasons,” I chuckled.

“Through here,” Emma nodded at a large doorway. I could hear the squeals of pigs beyond.

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in,” I sing-songed as I swaggered my way into a scene of bloody carnage.

Yes, we might be up shit creek without a paddle, but there was no reason to be a broody asshole.

If something was trying to fuck up my happy ending, I’d fuck them up first.

******

Nathaniel Essex let the energy dissipate from his hands as more intruders arrived in his main lab.

He recognized all of them, of course, but it seemed his opponent had the better reinforcements.

A shame that. Essex had such high hopes for his current batch of Marauders. He had used up his entire backlog of clones in the pits to develop the current group. As he had suspected, repeated bloodshed had sped up the development of mutations, it had left him with barely a thousand soldiers.

While it was a respectable force, it wasn’t enough to stand up to the Elden Lord and his Consorts.

A shame. A real shame.

If Essex just had more time, he could have grown more clones, harvested more Blood, spread it farther, and pushed humanity’s evolution along much faster.

Ah well. It was for just such occasions that redundant plans were made.

This body was going to die, no doubt. Teleportation had not worked since the first intruder had arrived, so escape was likely impossible as well.

An annoyance at best.

While this was Sinister main base, he had dozens hidden all over the world. Each contained samples so he could regrow anything he lost here, even if it would set him back

slightly.

It was just a shame about Pryor and the infant. They had such potential.

With death, or at least destruction of this body, imminent and unavoidable, Nathaniel Essex ceased fighting and focused more on the most important thing.

Gathering information for use later.

There was one piece that stood out right away.

“Was the entire conference staged?” Essex asked, straitening himself and regrowing the severed arm. The few eyes he lost were inconsequential, but the mutant still regrew enough of them, so he had seventeen total. Essex liked even numbers. “I should have guessed as much. For a mutant such as Miss Frost to say such words so publicly was grossly out of character.”

“You know her?” The Elden Lord said with a smile as he held up his hand, fingers interlocked with Emma Frost’s. “I thought you were more interested in the Grey and Summer bloodlines.”

“Of course I know her,” Essex sniffed disdainfully, idly brushing an ear off his neck with a claw. “Those two simply possessed the greatest chance of providing the next step of evolution, the Mutant Messiah, if you will. But to create Scott Summers and Jean Grey, I had to carefully select from other bloodlines to breed true. Miss Frost’s lineage has produced quite a few mutants of power with abilities leaning towards psionics. They were a viable candidate. Tell me, since when has she been aiding you? Did you recruit her as soon as you arrived on Earth? Before? After?”

“After,” the Abomination said, *his three mouths moving as one*. “Tell you what, since you want to talk, let’s talk. I like talking. I answer your questions. You answer mine.”

“I suppose I am not in a position to negotiate,” Nathaniel said, looking around the room.

The blue woman, the self-proclaimed goddess, had withdrawn her puppets with her husband’s arrival and was watching the pair with a blank expression. The dark-skinned Changer/Mover stalked around the room like a feline, slaying the experiments that still lived and struggled.

No matter, Sinister had other boars, including the original, in other locations.

Of most interest, Frost did not do anything, keeping her eyes closed. The geneticist recognized a common sign of a psychic using their powers, though he had progressed beyond such tells a century ago. Since he could not feel her attempting to break into his mind, she must be aiming for those of the clones.

A waste of effort. Not only did they not hold any important information, but the Blood reinforced the mind of everyone who imbibed it. That Emma Frost was struggling so much

with such feeble minds, even reinforced, might indicate that he had overestimated the power of her abilities.

Something to note.

Now that he had lost both Grey and Pryor, and the baby might have died in the commotion, he would need to find another psychic to breed with Scott. The combination of energy manipulation and psionic abilities remained the best choice for producing the next stage of evolution.

After they took in an appreciable amount of Blood, of course.

Couldn't evolve without Blood.

And doing it before the first impregnation would be preferable to not waste nine months. Essex had already tested the Blood and its effect on newborns. No need to do so again, and having a contrast between prenatal and postnatal injections of Blood would provide interesting data.

So caught up in his ideas for his future experiments, Essex almost missed the first of the Elden Lord's questions.

"How did you get these boars," *the meat puppet asked.*

"I cloned them," Essex answered immediately and with pride. "It was a bit tricky, but the Blood wants to spread. A fascinating discovery. Not alive, but self-propagating. That shall be my first question. What is the nature of this Blood?"

"A plague." The millions of eyes looked at Essex with amusement. If he didn't give proper information, neither would they. "What is your goal?"

"Evolution." Again, an easy answer. For the sake of gaining more information himself, Essex gave some more context this time. "The Blood facilitates the development of mutations, stimulating evolutionary development in a fraction of the time without it. With it, humanity shall ascend to the ultimate endpoint of evolution within this generation rather than the millennia I had initially projected. What is the optimal use for development with the aid of the Blood?"

"Absorbing blood through killing others in ever-increasing amounts and then having a representative of a Great One turn that blood into permanent power. Without the second step, the blood is just a plague that mutates those infected, strengthening and healing them but completely transitory and uncontrollable. What was the plan with framing me?"

Fascinating. Was that why the clones had mutated significantly while the *Infant*'s Family remained humanoid?

Not that the mutations were a problem. They were worth studying all on their own. But it did present the problem of how Sinister would gain access to such a representative. Control was essential for science.

“I wished to retrieve my test subjects, and you were a convenient distraction. You have also invested considerable effort in remaining cordial with the heroes of Earth despite your position of strength. I hoped that should they put enough pressure on you, you would release the Phoenix Force to appease them. With enough Blood, Madelyn Pryor should be able to become a host, as she is a lesser clone of Grey, as you mentioned. I had not accounted for your knowledge of alternate versions of myself. An oversight. Is the Blood the greatest method of evolution you are aware of?”

“No. While it strengthens those infected in proportion to their blood intake, the side effects are too severe. Even should every lifeform in the universe be infected and then harvested by one being, it would still face the limits of physicality, of its body. Are you familiar with or employed by Sublime, Apocolypse, Darkseid, Nekron, the Entities known as Worms in this universe or any other being of significant power greater than your own?”

Disappointing but expected. The being before Sinister had already evolved, needing one final step to achieve perfection. It would make sense that It knew of better ways.

“All of those are unknown to me except Apocalypse. That is the name of a mutant I met over a century ago. While we initially worked together on the study of mutants and shared the ideal evolution. I recognized the use of humanity to introduce biodiversity to facilitate the development of genetic variables and allow for a wider pool of mutations to choose from. Apocalypse favoured the removal of humans and weaker mutants to ensure only the powerful could survive. A shortsighted belief. We parted long ago, and I have not heard from him since. What is the optimal path to power to reach the end of evolution?”

“There are an infinite number of paths to power. Genetics. Invention. Borrowing power from higher beings. Enlightenment. Magic. I can think of hundreds of thousands of ways for individuals to ‘evolve.’ None of them are easy. None of them ever end. The only end is Death. And only one path do I consider the best. To ever chase Freedom. Are you familiar with Parliaments of Earth such as the Parliament of Trees, of Flames, and of Metal?”

“I am not. What is the best way for a race to evolve as a whole rather than as an individual?”

“That is an impossibility, a catch twenty-two. Once a race evolves, they are no longer the same race, by definition. The only way for a race to evolve and still remain themselves is if they are a unified whole. A gestalt consciousness, a hive mind, or one being with multiple bodies that can evolve independent of the consciousness controlling them. To become such a race, the previous type of being must have evolved and changed to such a hive mind that calling them the previous race would be wrong. Individuals can evolve and change. Races can not do the same and continue as they were. What do you know of the

beings that control the Endbringers?"

"Nothing. Endbringer biology has been inscrutable since their first appearance. Thanks to the Stranger, no samples were recovered before it was slain recently. I have not been able to study any recovered pieces since. A more detailed version of the question this time. What is the optimal path for the inhabitants of this Earth to evolve past the current limits?"

"I have no idea. There is no best answer for anything. Just better or worse, depending on differing metrics. Uploading consciousness into robots or computers would ensure longer lives but remove the biological desires that push people along. Continued breeding between aliens, mutants, humans, and other compatible species will ensure a wide variety of abilities, societies, and races but will almost guarantee conflict between them. The winner will not be the best, but the one left standing at the end. All growth comes at a cost. In lives. In happiness. In potential. There is no perfect path. Something as vague and random as evolution cannot be controlled. Life is chaos. Only when we look at things in hindsight do we make up plans that were never there. Can you still shapeshift?"

"I can. A useful mutation I gave myself thanks to a study of a woman in the nineteen twenties. If I wish to use Blood to push the inhabitants of this planet further down the evolutionary line, what is the optimal way to do it?"

"Cease thinking about evolution as an inherently desirable outcome. Evolution is the adaptation of species to their environment through the propagation of advantageous mutations in that environment. It does not make the species better or worse; it just makes it better suited to its current situation and facilitates the propagation of desirable traits. Situations change through internal or external factors. And even if an individual of a species has advantages mutations, which are largely random, it would be pointless if they do not propagate them. Finally, the more specialized the species, the less it is able to adapt. Continual evolution in the short term will ensure a species's destruction in the long term. Forced evolution is not a problem. Evolution for the sake of evolution is."

"You did not answer my question."

"Fine. The theoretically optimal way to use the blood plague to force the population's evolution would be to designate millions of quarantined zones, infect everyone with the blood, and have them fight. Within each zone, a handful of promising individuals with already favourable mutations or desirable characteristics should be allowed access to representatives of a Great One. This way, after these individuals have killed everything in their zones, all the blood will have accumulated within them but will still maintain a human form and mind to ensure they can breed with each other. The large number of quarantine zones is to account for failures and ensure a large enough population for

genetic diversity in the end. This is all under the assumption that the use of the blood plague is the only factor. I repeat, this is not the way to do things. This is a Very Bad Idea (TM). Last question."

Sinister blinked his twenty-seven eyes in surprise.

Why end things now?

Despite his initial dismissal of the Elden Lord as a lizard with power, the Abomination before him was much wiser than Sinister had given him credit for.

What had started as a simple method of trying to gain more information had evolved into a genuinely interesting exchange of ideas.

While *It* might not be familiar with the exact science of genetics, *It* had a firm grasp of the theories of evolution. More than that, *Its* multiversal level of existence gave *It* a fascinating viewpoint.

And, to be honest, it was just nice to converse with someone as an intellectual equal who wasn't weighed down by morals, like most heroes, or a monumental ego, like most villains.

Had things been different, Mister Sinister and the Elden Lord might have worked together to push humanity into a golden age.

Oh, Sinister was defiantly going to find a way to kill and harvest the Elden Lord's genetic material and those of his 'wives.' They were too fascinating subjects to ignore and could teach him quite a bit. After all, he still needed to crack what made the Elden Lord's blood different from that of the Boar. And the 'Dragon Factor' was still undiscovered.

But maybe he'd clone *It* after he had cracked *Its* secrets. Just to have someone to talk to.

"If you can shapeshift, why do you look like that?"

"Look like what?" Sinister frowned, looking down at himself.

Sure, his clothes were in disarray and dirty, a result of the battle from earlier, but that couldn't be helped.

Sinister idly burst a pustule with a claw to ensure it hadn't blocked his view of something on his hooves.

No, everything seemed to be as it should.

"…Right," *the eyes sighed*. "You have everything, Emma?"

"Perfectly."

At some point, the rest of *Its* Family had arrived. They had remained silent, which Essex was thankful for, just watching the exchange between the two men. Their effort to surround the geneticist didn't matter. There was no way the Elden Lord would let this body live.

Thankfully, *It* didn't know about his clones.

Nathaniel was genuinely excited to get to work. So many new ideas from such a short conversation.

After a few months of laying low and running tests, he'd emerge and see how the world handled the changes he had wrought. That would give plenty of new data and samples Sinister could use for further tests.

The Blood was like the gift that kept on giving.

"Medea, can you deal with the piggy bastard? His stank is really starting to mess with me."

Nathanial Essex looked at the *Abomination in a human suit* as the floor started to glow.

"What smell do you speak of? I am a bit dirty because of the fight, but I am a scientist." It was the offence to professional pride more than anything that had Essex's thirteen eyes narrow in anger at the insult. "I keep myself perfectly clean while I work."

"And I am sure your lab adheres to the highest health standard," the *Dragon/Great One/Man* drawled sarcastically.

Which also offended Sinister.

Nathanial Essex looked around the lab. The intruders had knocked over many of his instruments and machines, and the floor was littered with broken glass and metal. None of which were a result of Essex's dereliction.

It was a shame about the death of so many of his test subjects, and their bodies did impede his view of the intruders a bit, but that was all.

Aside from that, it was pristine.

"Right… I don't know what I was expecting. I've wasted enough time on you. Anyway, Piglet, it's time to go the way of the Pooh. Honey, can you Teddy this up for me?"

"I hate you," a voice bit out with a long-suffering sigh behind Sinister.

Nathaniel Essex did not turn to look, his attention captured by the image at his feet.

At some point, someone had carved arcane magical symbols using the blood spilled.

How unscientific.

Then, Mister Sinister felt a tearing sensation as his blood boiled and his soul tore to shreds. From both, like a fire travelling down an electric wire, the curse spread to every other 'Nathaniel Essex' in existence.

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I stared at what used to be Mister Sinister, or at least the Boar Beastkin he had been in

the end before Medea's spell popped him like a zit.

Talking to the walking crime against nature and Me had been mildly interesting but viscerally disgusting. I hadn't been exaggerating about the smell.

Still, it had given Emma the time she needed to get everything she needed as I pulled topics to the forefront of his mind. Medea also had plenty of time to be thorough with her spell.

I just wish the moron hadn't been a walking advertisement for why believing in pseudo-sciences and misunderstanding the fundamental theories of science was a recipe for disaster.

Evolution was not the process of 'Survival of the Best.'

Evolution was 'Best at Surviving.' All it did was encourage traits that facilitated the propagation of themselves. And even then, it was only in their current environment.

While I respected scientists and the scientific method, morons who thought they knew what they were doing gave everyone else a bad name.

Good riddance.

I kicked a larger chunk of what was once Essex, what looked like a snout, and used my Element to ensure he was really dead.

Yep, super mega ultra giga dead.

I didn't even try to stop myself.

"Anyone in the mood for bacon?"

Most of my wives looked at me with varying levels of disgust.

"I believe there isn't a piece big enough for bacon." Robin, as always, was willing to play along with my terrible jokes. "Burnt Ends. That is what we should have for dinner."

I couldn't help it.

In a pocket dimension filled with mutated corpses, in a room drowning in blood and covered in Maneater Boars, and having accidentally released a plague of biblical proportions, I honestly couldn't help it.

I doubled over with laughter as the looks of disgust shifted to the pirate, who pretended to look innocent.

It was such a stupid, terrible, and inappropriate joke that it had me laughing and laughing and laughing.

Emma let me have my moment of mirth before reminding me of the situation.

"We need to be going," she told me. "Sinister spread it much farther than you guessed. He put it in water supplies."

That sobered me up, and I barked out orders.

"Everyone gather round," I said. "Raven, take us to the entrance. Emma, pass any

extra locations you found in his head to her. Robin. Ranni."

"My Lord?"

"I want you two to work with Raven," I met the eyes of the goddess, willing her to understand the seriousness of the situation. "I want clones and dolls at every one of those locations. Do not let even a bug in or out."

"Got it," Robin answered, as Ranni nodded imperiously.

"Yoruichi, grab Tsunade and Panacea. Have them look over the Pryor, the baby, and Mystique. Artoria and Melina have them at the Mansion. Don't do anything to them, just run tests." I paused as another thought entered my mind. "Medea, you go with her. I don't think magic can help, but I'd love to be proven wrong."

"Very well," Medea agreed but shot me a dirty look. I guess she was still annoyed about the Winnie the Pooh pun.

I regret nothing.

Raven consumed us all in shadow, bringing us to the entrance of the pocket world.

"Diana, can you find your counterpart?"

"What for," my Amazon asked in surprise.

"The meeting was FUBAR." I grimaced at the way she straitened in worry. "Essentially, we had ironed things out when all the heroes were kidnapped in such a way to look like we did. Batman knows the truth. I am having him run interference with the other heroes, but some familiar faces would probably help him and us."

"Where were they taken?"

"I don't know. They are not our priority." Diana looked like she would argue, but I hurried to continue before she could say anything. "We will try to rescue them, but if we don't contain every single one of Sinister's labs before things start breaking out, things will get much worse. I will do my best to rescue them later and explain everything as soon as possible, but I need you to trust me."

Diana didn't look super happy, her lips set in a thin line, but she nodded, rubbing her brassers as she did.

"Very well, though I will require all the information later."

"I'll give it."

I honestly was sick of my past always coming up to bite me in the ass like this. I wasn't trying to hide things from them, no matter how much I desired them to see me in a positive light. It was just that we had barely been together full-time for a few months.

Relationships take communication. Communication takes time. And we had both too much and too little time together.

I had watched them for the entire year and knew almost all of their secrets. They

didn't have the same luxury as me. On top of their time off the Island for their various hobbies and jobs, getting to know both Ranni and Melina and all this bullshit with this annoying 'Oppressor' asshole, all my wives had been more than patient with me.

And I realized I wanted them to know.

I did not want them to love a fake image they had in mind, one born from only their limited window into my time in my cell. Our relationship had been artificially hastened by Dragon Aura and my own Mad Love, but I nonetheless wanted it to be real.

We were going to be together forever.

If it was going to work, they needed to know 'Mikael the Monster' as well as 'Mikael the Fake Hero' and 'Mikael the Man.'

"Scathach," I said, not letting my thoughts show on my face as I turned to the Dragon of Blood. She looked at me with a raised brow and a smirk. "For now, go with Medea and the others to the Island. See if your Runes or Element can sense anything from our captives. Be ready to leave at a moment's notice, though. I might need you."

Depending on how things went, she could be the key to this situation.

I just hoped I didn't need to use her.

"Valeria says she has something we can use," Melina told me as soon as we left the dimension.

"Great, Glynda, you're with me. We'll pick that up, then bounce between all the labs Emma found in his head. We're doing this bandit style. Looting and burning."

"Understood."

Man, I loved women of action. I could see their confusion at my seriousness, but they were willing to work with me. No damsels in need of rescuing for me, thanks. Give me a heroine every day of the week.

"Am I forgetting anything?" I asked Emma.

"Just one thing."

I looked at Emma in surprise. I thought I had the basics covered, at least for the immediate issues.

"What? Is Odin? If he fucks with us right now, I am eating him like I did the other Skyfathers. And, no offence, but Melina doesn't have enough experience with the Phoenix Force for any reality warping at the level we need just yet. Give it a few years."

I should have known by how her face was carefully set in a neutral mask that she was up to something.

"Just that you owe Valeria an apology."

"What for?" I seriously tried to think about what.

"For getting angry at her," Emma smirked. "We did end up kidnapping a baby."

My face must have been fucking hilarious because everyone was laughing.
Eventually, I joined them before we split up for our tasks.
It was precisely when things looked bad that I needed laughs like that.
If the world ends, I'll greet it with a middle finger, a pun, and a laugh.

Author's Note:

Not much to say here. I am glad we are back on the main story, as I am incredibly excited for the coming weeks and months as we near the end. I hope to keep moments of levity, even when things are dark. You can always find something to laugh about if you look hard enough.

I hope everyone had a great New Year and that 2024 will be your best year yet. I will see you all next week.

DREAM II

"Man's enemies are not demons, but human beings like himself."
-Lao Tzu

"Wake her up," I told Panacea as I kept my eyes on our prisoner.

"Say please."

"Wake her up or I'm telling Vicky about some of your… experiments at Xavier's."

Despite the threat, I was smirking at the sass the biokinetic was giving me. To be honest, I liked Amelia. Not only because she was my primary source of Man Flesh (TM), but she had just helped my wives deal with a threat to my home.

I side-eyed the door that led to Tsunade as she continued to run her tests on the unconscious Mystique.

I trusted her to know her limits and to take care of our unborn children, but a father couldn't help but worry.

Man, I was going to be a total pushover father.

Eh. Worth it.

"How do you even know about that?" Amelia asked with wide eyes and an ashen face, bringing me back to the present. She looked around the room like she feared her sister would burst into our improvised hospital/prison instead of helping the Amazons rebuild.

A problem I'd deal with later.

"I have my sources," I smirked. Sources like Emma Freed from limits when we were first scouting Amy.

Who knew giving a bunch of hormonal teenagers superpowers would lead to sexual experimentation that bordered on Cthulhuian rituals?

I did. As did anyone with a functioning brain.

Superpowered sex makes the brain go BRRRRR.

Still, Rogue was much freakier than I gave her credit for.

Good for her.

"Fine," Panacea grumbled as she poked Madelyne Pryor, waking her up. "I'm going to check on the kid again."

I waved her off, keeping my eyes on the redhead that slowly stirred to consciousness.

I saw the moment the drowsiness gave way to the memories before her capture.

"NATHAN!" Madelyne shouted as she sat bolt upright in her bed, eyes wide and frantic as she searched for her son with a desperation all too common to new mothers.

“He’s safe,” I said softly. A half-truth, but we’ll get to that.

The clone’s eyes snapped to me. I saw confusion. Fear. Anger. A pungent cocktail of negative emotions as the woman glared at me with all the hate in the world.

“YOU!” She snarled, trying to lunge from her bed at me. “What have you done to my son!?”

She didn’t get very far. While she could sit up in the bed, her legs were strapped down, and her arms were tied in such a way as to allow her to extend them, but stopped her from reaching the end of the bed to free her legs. It wasn’t chains that held her, but there was no way Madelyne was getting out of those enchanted straps without help.

I let the woman struggle fruitlessly, not saying a word as she showered me with insults, demanding her son, her freedom, my flayed corpse, and any number of other impossible things at the moment.

Was I the bad guy here?

…

Nah.

“Are you done?” I asked casually when she finally paused her struggle to heave deep breaths.

That set off another round of tirades.

Again, I let her. I honestly didn’t care if people insulted me, and she did have a reason to. I had technically kidnapped her and her newborn baby and was running experiments on them.

Ugh, I was never going to live down the fact that I was equivalent to a comic book villain now. I should get the spandex out right now and practice my monologue.

… Then again, villainesses were seriously hot. And the puns. Villains got the best puns.

Maybe I can convince my wives to also become villains with me?

Robin could be something like ‘Madam Lotus.’ She could dress in evening gowns and go for the Femme Fatale look. Yoruichi could catfight with Selina Kyle over the ‘Catwoman’ name. Glynda could be the ‘Disciplinarian’ and rock the school teacher aesthetic.

We could be called the ‘ Evil Hoard,’ and I already had an evil lair.

But what sort of crimes should we commit?

Jaywalking was a must, of course, but something more serious to seal my dastardly reputation.

Maybe I could hold a city hostage until the best artists in the world sculpted my wives in various poses?

Nah, Medea would want to do that herself.

So, what else did villains do?

We didn't need money, I had no heroic rivals, and there wasn't a security system in the world that could keep me out, so stealing would be boring.

… Man, this supervillain thing was more complicated than it looked.

Idea!

I'll cover a city in custard. All of it.

Maybe Brisbane?

Then I drop thousands of giant plastic replicas of whale dicks on the city, each carved with various pro-ocean conservation statements. I was already helping this world's seas, so why not go all the way and make it my 'thing?'

Observers will make the obvious connection between the custard and dildos but will not expect that it is only step one of my master plan.

Next, I'd let the Australian heat cook the custard. The smell will drive people crazy, and then-

"What do you want?"

Madelyne's question tore me from my twelve-step plan to conquer the universe.

"Oh, are you actually ready to talk?" I asked.

Sure, she was a victim, but there'd be countless other victims if I didn't figure out a solution. I hadn't even done anything to her, despite being falsely (at the time) accused of kidnapping her, so I was entirely within my right to be snarky.

"What. Do. You. Want." She bit out between clenched teeth.

"You're going to hurt yourself if you grit your teeth so much," I said, then sighed. "What do you actually remember? I freed you from Sinister's control, but I have no idea how that will work with false memories."

"What?" Madelyne asked, brow furrowed.

"Right," I sighed again.

Then I told her the whole story, as far as I knew it.

How she had been kidnapped, and I had been framed for it.

How she had telepathically interrupted the peace conference, leading to me fighting the X-men.

How, after all the heroes had been kidnapped, my Family and I rescued her and her child from her actual kidnapper.

I could see her struggling to process all this, and I am sure she didn't really believe me, so I settled on a simple solution now that she was awake.

"Do you want to be free of all false memories?" I asked casually.

“Of course I do! What kind of quest-“

I poked Madelyne as she was in the middle of talking, freeing her from false memories.

All of them.

They hit her all at once.

I saw horror dawn on her face, and it was the instinct honed from a million battles that had me jumping out of the way in time to avoid the projectile vomit that exited her mouth.

Gross.

Then again, if she just remembered Sinister’s labs, I didn’t blame her.

Thankfully, I had destroyed them all. Good riddance. There had been quite a few, but I was… motivated.

Like her earlier tirade, Madelyne’s vomiting went on for a bit. I approached again when her stomach was empty and nothing was left to expel.

“Oh god,” Madelyne whispered in horror. “I’m not real. I was never real. I am a fake. A clone. My parents aren’t real. I never went to school. I never had friends or pets.”

“I actually have some good news on that front,” I said with a smile as I cast a spell to clean up all this mess. Man, magic was so convenient. “If it helps, unlike most clones, you have a fully unique soul courtesy of our friendly neighbourhood firebird.” I paused before I clarified my words. “Unique as in unique to this world. Multiversally, there are countless versions of you and me, some of which will have identical souls.”

“How is that supposed to make me feel better,” Madelyne asked, glaring at me with wild eyes. “I am a clone of my husband’s dead lover, created by a madman who practically forced us together! My entire life has been a lie! Whether I have a soul or not doesn’t fucking matter!”

“If. I said, ‘If it helps,’” I muttered petulantly. Then I sighed again. “Listen, I get it. More than anybody else, I really get it. The loss of identity. The fear. The panic. But I am telling you right now, as a complete expert on souls, you are real. Your child is real. Your love might have been built on a lie, but it was real. If you work at it, it will be real again.”

I stared into the scared, tired eyes and willed her to understand how genuine I was being. “

Right now, my Family and every hero in this world is working on finding your husband. Once I bring you back home, you will have plenty of time to sort out your marriage, feelings, and place in the world.”

“And you will? Bring me back? Just like that?” Madelyne asked doubtfully.

“We’ve come to the snag.” I held up a hand as her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Do

you remember what Sinister was doing?"

"Something to do with genetics, blood, and… evolution?"

"Close enough," I shrugged. "The basics is this. He attempted, stupidly, to try and kick start human and mutant evolution by infecting the world with a blood-based plague. You and your son were infected." Again, I held a hand as she looked like she would panic. "While you remain here, you are not at risk of anything. We are working on a cure but cannot let you out until one is found. Am I correct in believing that you do not want any of the blood in you? You want to be cured of every drop of Old Blood?"

"Why the stupid question?" Madelyne asked. "Of course, I don't want a plague in me."

That was enough.

For the second time in a few minutes, the hospital room/prison was covered in bodily fluid. This time, it was all blood as Madelyne Pryor was 'Freed' from every drop of Old Blood in her body.

All one and a half gallons of it.

I kept my finger on the horrified woman to ensure she didn't die by having every drop of blood violently ejected from her body.

I needn't have worried. Like Rhino and his armour, the 'Freeing' had no adverse side effects for the person Freed. She still had one and a half gallons of blood in her body, just Freed from all factors that connected it to Bloodborne.

"What the fuck did you do?" Madelyne snarled, yanking her arm from me and scooting as far from me as her bonds would allow.

Hmmm? Did this count as creating matter since I had essentially doubled the amount of blood? Food for thought.

"I tried to cure you," I said simply, not letting her know I had succeeded.

Or that when I tried the same while she was unconscious, I had failed.

I stood with a sigh and, with a tap of my hand, 'Freed' her from her bonds.

The woman hurried to slide away from me, still glaring.

I rolled my eyes and waved my hand to clean the room and us again. I made sure not even a drop of blood survived.

"One of my wives will bring you to the suite we set aside for you and the kid. Unlimited food, books, and every entertainment system you can imagine and a few you can't. You are free to wander around or outside if you want. Anywhere you can't get to is off-limits, duh, but there are only a few of those."

Seriously, this mansion was stupidly large since it was essentially a hollowed-out mountain. It was easy to seal off the top half, make a passage from her room to the outside and set up a boundary field to keep anybody from getting too far if she decided to run.

“I imagine you want time to process everything and see your kid. We have everything you need to take care of him easily. With any luck, this will be a short vacation, time to get your head on straight after the recent… revelations.”

The woman continued staring at me like a cornered animal as I left the room, leaving the door open whenever she gathered the courage to step out.

One of the perks of Robin’s Element was that she was essentially a hive mind of herself. I could trust our prisoners to always be under watch if Pryor decided to do something… drastic.

I sighed, running a hand down my face, feeling very tired.

“She not fall for your charms?” Panacea snarked as she leaned against the wall, a biologically engineered cigarette in her hand. I stole it. “Hey!”

I didn’t really smoke; it had never been my vice, but I felt it was appropriate.

“Did you know,” I said conversationally as I took a long draft. Why do people like these things again? “That babies are stupid?”

“They’re babies,” Amy deadpanned as she lit up another. “They’re not supposed to be smart.”

“Yes, but they are so dumb that they don’t even know how to be Free.”

“What are you babbling about?”

“Humans are such stupid animals.” I incinerated the cigarette with a spell. That’s what I get for trying to be cool. I should stick to goofy. “Always chasing, always hunting for the next achievement. Always climbing to the next peak. Just to see if we can.” I loved humanity. I loved that foolishness. But man, could they piss me off. “And babies are just humans at their most basic. No thoughts for the future. Just innocent animals. If something feels good, it is good.”

‘In Yharnam, they produced more blood than alcohol, as the former is the more intoxicating.’

Expecting an infant to want to be Free of something that feels good, that makes it ‘better,’ would be expecting too much.

“If you are going to keep ranting about nonsense, I will return to my patient,” Amy said with narrowed eyes. “Unless you did something to her?”

“You do that. For all three of them. Keep Mystique knocked out for the moment. Maybe you and Shaper will be able to do what I couldn’t. Whenever you want to go home, just call out. We are always watching.”

I flicked my wrist in a wave goodbye as I ascended the stairs to the part of the mansion closed off to all these ‘guests.’

“I have a long overdue conversation to get to.”

******

"What is going on?"

"Hello to you too," I greeted Diana as she joined the rest of us in the sitting room.

I didn't stop petting Medea, of course. One, because it was soothing, but two, because I didn't want to fucking die.

You only stop petting your cat when it decides you are done, not when you do. Otherwise, it will give you the cold shoulder for at least an hour.

A fate worse than death.

That and my fat floof had been in a foul mood since she had flapped in. Must have eaten something uppity.

"Now that we are all here," Medea (Wife) said with a roll of her eyes at my sass. "We would really like to know what has you and Emma so on edge."

"I honestly don't know where to start," I sighed. "I'm sure you all picked up some details. You're not dumb, and I haven't made it a secret, even if I haven't really talked about it. Why don't you tell me what you know, and I will fill in the blanks."

"A pig got off the island, pig-boy cloned it and spread its blood, the equivalent of a super plague, around the world," Yoruichi drawled, leaning back in her armchair casually. "That about sums it up?"

"More or less," I snorted.

"The blood comes from thy last world," Ranni continued. "The one after the Lands Between. The boars are like all animals on this Island, recreations of creatures thou hast encountered in thy travels."

"Yep."

"You were in that world for a very short time, considering you stopped summoning us after a month on your end," Robin picked up, sipping her coffee as she cast her mind back. "You returned to summoning us once a week to get to Emma's turn, as she was needed to 'wake you up.' For us, only a day and a half passed; for you, it was… seven weeks?"

"Eh, something like that."

To be honest, I had only really been able to keep track of time by the feeling of immanent summonings. I knew now that it was 'Future Me' connecting to 'Past Me' through the Dream to send the girls back/sideways. It wasn't time travel, but more like a time projection on the past.

"From what I saw," Scathach tapped an idle finger on her lips as she smirked at me. "It was not a nice place."

I blinked at her.

Right, she had been the next one in the 'cycle,' the pattern of summons that allowed me to predict who would be summoned next. She had been the first one called in Bloodborne and the only one summoned in Yharnam proper. All the others had been summoned while I was in the Chalice Dungeons below the city or in the Hunter's Dream.

"The One Reborn," I groaned, rubbing my face tiredly at the memory. "Right. That… thing. Miyazaki always had a thing for monsters made out of bodies, but that was hands down the worst." Just the memory of the smell was enough to get me to gag.

Scathach laughed, even as the others looked at me with frowns.

For most of my time during my sentence, I had tried to ensure they only saw the 'better' parts of my prisons. Anor Londo looked a lot better than Blightown, after all.

By Bloodborne, a combination of my fear of what I would do, my weariness after I failed to escape, and the sheer horror of Yharnam meant that I had largely stopped giving a fuck about putting on a show.

As I sat atop the piles of corpses that were once the abomination from beyond time and space, I felt the call of the summoning. I had let it happen. I was exhausted, emotionally, more than physically. I was covered in blood and other, more vile fluids. I hadn't been clean in days. I had slaughtered my way through a city of monsters.

I honestly had no fucks left to give at that point.

"Well, you got the gist, at least," I said, shaking my head. "Now let me tell you why it is a problem."

"The blood plague turns people into mutated abominations?"

"Well, yes, but actually no," I answered Robin's deadpan with my own. "This is a comic world. Strange plagues, infections, and things that cause mutations are a dime a dozen here. Even if Tsunade here couldn't fix most of them, which she probably could, this world has no end to super geniuses and strange powers like Valeria and Amelia."

"But I couldn't fix it," Tsunade said with narrowed eyes. "You call it a plague. It spreads like one, but it isn't. It is not a disease or virus or anything like that. It is just blood."

"You are starting to see the problem," I said with a crooked smirk. It came out a lot more tired than I wanted. "Tell me what you all found."

"It's not magic," Medea said instantly. "There's power there. A spiritual and conceptual weight in that blood which would make it a very potent material for magecraft, but the blood itself isn't magical at all."

"It is completely biological in nature," Tsunade agreed. "And as I said, it isn't a plague. The Rot is a plague, a fungal infection, to be more specific. This is just blood. It is

a universal donor that optimizes the bodies of the recipients. It heals them. Makes them stronger. It is like a lesser version of your own blood. When I ran scans on all our 'prisoners.'" It was still a bit weird that a baby was a prisoner, but I would appreciate the irony until I found a way to get it home safely. "None of them are in any way disadvantaged by it. The infant is so healthy that I would swear he was an Uzumaki if I didn't know any better. Nor is the mother any worse off after you removed it from her. I can't say one way or the other whether the shapeshifter, Mystique, has been improved as her biology is too different from what I know."

"It's blood," Scathach said simply with a shrug. "Powerful blood, but just blood."

"That is all it is. Blood," I sighed again. Man, I was doing that a lot lately. Maybe I should stop? From now on, every time I sighed, I'd give Medea a tummy rub instead. That would improve my mood. "You weren't wrong, Tsunade; it is like my blood. Dragon Blood, the perk of the Catalogue that allows me to empower others through the absorption of my fluids, is a more potent version of the Old Blood, working on a conceptual level rather than a biological one. That is where the problem is. The simplicity of it. It is just blood. The blood of an eldritch being, but just blood."

"That does not sound simple at all."

"Mikael," Artoria interposed simply, ignoring Yoruichi's snark and cutting to the heart of the matter. "You have been avoiding the issue."

"I have," I sigh- Tummy rub, tummy rub, tummy rub. "I'll just out and say it. The blood, as it is, is a categorically good thing that only benefits the 'infected.' There is no cure because there is no disease."

"Those clones did not benefit," Raven deadpanned.

"They did," I disagreed. "Make no mistake, they were abominations that needed to be put down. None of you should feel bad about killing them, but the blood made them 'better' in every way. Except for the one that mattered. Their humanity. Because that is the limiting factor."

"Self-modification," Medea joined in, eyes narrowed in realization. "That's what is doing. It heals and improves, but when the blood finds a weakness, it attempts to fix it. And humans are creatures of weakness. A form of 'Innocent Monster' perhaps? Or closer to 'Golden Rule (Body)?' A correction of human limitations."

"Ding ding ding. Give the witch a cookie," I nodded. "From an evolutionary standpoint, the only thing humans have going for us is high intelligence, the ability to use symbolic language and our opposable thumbs. Other animals are just as smart but can't communicate detailed information, inhibiting the transmission of information between generations. Some use tools and, given enough time, would probably evolve to replace us.

The simple fact is humanity is not special in the least. It is a fluke that we evolved first. We are just one tiny race on a tiny rock flying around a tiny star in a tiny galaxy in an enormous universe. On every scale, planetary or galactically, humanity just sucks."

"You are being too harsh," Diana disagreed. "No matter your view, it is a fact that we all come from worlds where humanity is the dominant species."

"Not mine," Glynda raised her hand. "In mine, we were the prey. It is why our fighters were called hunters. They were the exception, not the rule."

"Nor mine," Robin agreed. "While humans were the most numerous, any number of others could have been the more dominant species if humanity hadn't been the one to colonize the world. In my world, humanity is the equivalent of the English language here. They just happened to spread far enough at the right time to become a staple. There was nothing inherently superior about them."

"He has a point," Tsunade also joined in. "Humanity is incredibly fragile. Our skin is thinner, and our organs are fragile. Exoskeletons are inherently superior tools to internal skeletal structures from a biological standpoint. And that is only defensively. Our senses are weaker than other animals. We lack fur to moderate our body temperature, though we make up for it with the ability to sweat. We also lack natural weapons, such as claws, fangs or tails, that we can use to defend ourselves. Entire clans in my world became famous for having one animal trait that gave them a massive advantage over other ninja."

"Spirituality," Yoruichi chimed in on Diana's side, surprisingly looking more severe than usual. "The afterlife, the human soul is unique in its ability to adapt and linger."

"Religion isn't unique to humans," I shook my head. "Elephants have been known to go on pilgrimages, to bury their dead, and other 'useless' tasks that hint at a sort of spiritual root. Again, we are getting a confirmation bypass. All the worlds you are from are connected to mine through media. That's where my prison is based on and where I filled out the Catalogue. Of course, they are human-centred. Humans like to tell stories with other humans. I could doodle a picture and, in the infinite variety of possibilities, there is a world out there that lines up with it. I didn't 'create' that world. It always existed. For every world where humans are the dominant species, there are just as many where they don't even exist. We are not special."

In my previous world, it was easy to forget that.

We had no proof of alien life, no superpowered beings, and the multiverse was a hypothesis that still didn't have enough evidence to be qualified as a scientific theory.

Still, it was true even there.

We, humanity, were less than ants when placed on the cosmic scale.

And humans couldn't deal with that.

“We got off topic,” I said, shaking my head. “I didn’t say all that to denigrate humans. I love humanity. It was to point out that humanity is not a ‘desirable’ trait to the beings whose blood the plague originated from. The Old Blood, the source of the plague Yharnam found, comes from Great Ones. Beings so far beyond human limits, ideas, and concepts that just being able to perceive them requires an enormous amount of Insight into the true nature of the world. If humans grow a sixth arm, tentacles, or claws, they do not see a problem. Great Ones are sympathetic to humans. They want to help, to improve humans, but their idea of help has led to entire civilizations being wiped from the map.”

The entire story of Bloodborne could be reduced to the attempt of humans and Great Ones to communicate with each other. To meet and join.

The Great Ones did it out of sympathy and a desire to find a surrogate for their inability to have children. Humans did it out of a desire to transcend mortality, to cure their diseases and afflictions.

And both sides died in the attempt.

“While I appreciate the logic behind the issue,” Tsunade interrupted my rambling. “What is preventing me, Medea, Scathach, and Panacea from creating something that will target the blood to purge it from the infected.”

“Because that would destroy every drop of blood in their body.” I didn’t joke. I didn’t smile. I met everyone’s eyes in turn as I spoke clearly and succinctly. “So long as even one drop of blood enters you, you become a source. The Beast Plague starts from the Old Blood, but all infected will transmit it.”

That was it.

The simple, terrible truth.

In Bloodborne, you could farm blood vials from almost every enemy, beast or kin, and all of them healed you. Just as enemies who killed you gained power from your own blood.

Anyone, everyone, was a source of the beast plague.

Even the player.

“Unless you are willing to kill every single person who ever touched that blood, there will never be an end to the beast plague. That is why what Sinister did was so terrible. He put it in the water. Millions of people are already infected. If I can Free them, I will. If I can’t, if they choose the power of the blood, or if I cannot get to them in time before it is too late, then the events of Yharnam will repeat. And I do not want to become a beast again.”

Faces set as realization dawned.

Still, some were confused, unable to put the pieces together because their image of me

was wrong.

I couldn't have done what I was hinting at. Not me. Not the man they loved.

It was harder to see the monster in people you knew than in the stranger on the street.

"Sir Bard…" Priscilla, quiet until now, whispered lowly.

I needed to be clear.

They needed to hear this.

"Of the thousands of people who called Yharnam home," I continued, pretending I didn't hear the heartbreak in her words. "Less than a hundred had never imbibed blood. Man or woman, old or young. The blood was a cure-all, a panacea to fix every issue. It fueled the hunters, the scholars, and the everyday smuck. It was a religion, an institution. Those who didn't partake in communion were not just suspicious. They were evil. Heretics. There was no saving anyone who had even a drop."

"You-" Artoria cut herself off as she stared at me, eyes wide as she realized what I had done.

What I had had to do.

"I killed them all."

"Mikael."

I bulldozed over any attempt to interrupt me.

"There is an easy test to see who is infected. You cut yourself, you cut the person and drop some of their blood on you. If you heal, they are infected. If I healed, they died. Obviously, this is only viable if you are already infected, like I was, or are immune, like we are now. It will be even easier to do it now."

"Mikael."

I couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop.

For weeks, I had told them I wasn't a hero. Some still didn't really get it.

I had never been a larger-than-life character. I wasn't a character out of a story, a man from myth or fiction.

Maybe other Company Contractors, when they receive all the bonuses of the Catalogue and become infatuated with their own myth of uniqueness, could have risen above their baser nature.

Maybe someone else, not going through the crisis I had been in at the time, would have settled for just killing time until Emma was summoned.

It was just one world out of an infinite number of possibilities. They would do the bare minimum, beat the 'game,' and move on. To others, it might simply be a dream, a wish-fulfillment fantasy of power and sex.

They could ignore all the suffering and consequences of their actions or inaction.

Not me.

To me, it was always real. I had known I wasn't a protagonist ever since that small cell in the Undead Asylum. Things wouldn't just work out because of plot devices.

No Oscar would ever come to free me from my cell.

I had to do it myself.

I had to seize every happy ending with my own bloody claws.

I had done to Bloodborne what I did to all the worlds before.

I gave it the 'Happy Ending.'

Not for the people of Yharnam. They were too far gone. They had been the problem, the cancer I had needed to cut out.

But I had to hope the rest of the world would be better after leaving it.

I had to.

"Nobody ran. Even when word of me spread. If they tried, the beasts would get them. Or I would. I went through the city, house to house. I was so strong, so good at what I did, that not even the strongest beasts could stop me. Most who refused to take the blood had either already left Yharnam, been killed in the previous hunts, or lynched by the mobs that roamed the streets."

"Mikael!"

I was just a man.

In Bloodborne, I had no extraordinary abilities beyond my skill. No magic to heal me or rain cataclysmic destruction. The closest thing the world had to spells was borrowing abilities from Great Ones through special items, and they worked no better for me than anyone else.

"Not all were insane," I chuckled ruefully. "It was easy when they were. But some weren't. The blood enhances you, but only in ways that 'benefit' you. If you hunt, you become beast-like. If you study, you gain Insight easier. Blood doesn't create monsters. Humans do."

I remembered a kind, forsaken church dweller who offered sanctuary to the lost and scared.

He hadn't begged for his life. He just wanted the nightmare to end.

"If you simply live? If you are kind? If you don't kill or fight or try to ascend, you are just a healthier version of yourself. Those were few and far between, so choked was the city with blood and madness. But they existed. And they needed to die. Because even a drop was enough to destroy the entire Phtumeru race. I couldn't let that drop escape. So I killed them all. Beast. Kin. Man. I hunted them all. A hunter has to hunt. It's for your own good."

Like all Fromsoft games, there was no ‘happy end’ in Bloodborne. Miyazaki and his team were famous for leaving things open to interpretation, for there being no ‘right’ answer.

The ‘good’ ending was waking up from a nightmare, thinking everything had just been a bad dream.

But the blood plague still existed. The Great Ones were still there.

The ‘true’ ending was simply taking Gherman’s place in the Hunter’s Dream. Becoming another piece in the perpetual nightmare that goes on and on and on.

“And all that? All that pain and death and bloodshed? It was all just a breeding ritual. An attempt by the Great Ones to gain offspring. And it worked. I became a Great One. But even after I did and beat the game, the blood would remain. It always would. Unless I burned it from the Earth.”

The ‘secret’ ending, the one I had chosen in my paranoia, was the ‘best’ ending.

It was supposed to signify that an infant Great One would lead humanity into a new age where they didn’t need bodies that could be infected by the blood. Where they became beings of pure thought, unshackled by mortality.

I wouldn’t, couldn’t, do that. I couldn’t be trapped there as the god the world would have needed to lead it into that future.

I needed to be Free.

I would have left the blood plague behind to purge humanity from that world, as it had done for all the races that came before and all that would come after, rather than staying trapped in my eternal prison.

But I also was not the type of man who could do nothing when I had a solution to a problem.

I had forced a ‘Happy Ending’ on that world.

One where humanity had a hope, slim as it was, to grow by themselves. To become something more than beast or kin.

All it took was becoming both myself.

To save that world, I had to be a monster.

That had been Djura’s mistake. He had sought to keep the beasts, those who used to be people, alive out of guilt.

I had been beyond guilt.

Not better. Not worse.

Just a madman with a different solution. A man with an Out-of-context perspective and enough power to inflict my vision on that world.

“I burned Yharnam and all its inhabitants to the ground. I buried it in the rubble of

the chalice dungeons, hoping nobody would ever discover it again. Because if they did, there would be no saving that world."

There was silence in the room.

In turn, I met everyone's eyes, making sure they understood what I was saying.

"I would do it again."

I saw fear, pain, understanding, and so many other emotions of every range and spectrum. Not even my most morally fluid wives, Medea and Scathach, could take what I said without feeling something.

Except for Emma. She had known. She had always known.

In the grand scheme of things, most of the people in this room had killed more people than had been in Yharnam. Directly or indirectly. Even to me, my total kills in Bloodborne made up a fraction of a fraction of the beings I had killed in my time.

It wasn't the number that was the problem.

It was the totality.

I had single-handedly committed genocide against an entire city. Many of whom were guilty of no crime. Simple people, farmers, shopkeepers or labourers who had fallen to paranoia and fear. Who partaken of the Old Blood, not out of ambition or evil but to survive.

Just as I had.

I had my reasons for the slaughter, reasons they no doubt saw the terrible logic of, but that didn't change what I had done.

My Family would have to acknowledge that. Acknowledge that I might not be the man they had built up in their mind.

I might have put my best foot forward with them, but I had never claimed to be a hero.

I was just me.

Some would have a harder time accepting that than others.

Diana stood.

With purposeful steps, she marched over to me. The entire room watched her with batted breath. The tension rose as she stood less than a foot from my seat.

Diana slapped me.

Faster than I could react and hard across the cheeks, my head twisting with the force of the blow. She hadn't held back. That slap would have killed an ordinary man.

There were gasps around the room, and I had to hold Medea down as she started hissing at the Amazon.

I had expected something like that.

The slap was not because of hatred or anger or anything like that.

It was because her image of me, already worn and torn, had irrevocably changed.

People lash out in their grief.

Face already healing, I looked into the eyes of the heroine.

For a long second, we stared at each other. The room watched us, holding their breath.

What did she see?

All I saw was the woman I loved. And she was in pain. Something she loved had died.

When Diana looked at me, did she see a beast? A monster who had killed millions in a selfish desire for freedom?

Most hadn't been innocent victims, but there had definitely been countless bystanders, guiltless of any crime, crushed under my feet as I endlessly walked forward.

Or did she simply see me?

A simple man, given power and thrust into situations where there was no right answer.

I am not sure I wanted to know.

Then Diana kissed me. Softly. It was heartrendingly gentle.

I pretended not to feel the tears that flowed from her eyes.

Then, the moment passed, and we separated.

Diana turned and left the room, not looking back.

Emma was about to say something, but I spoke first.

"Let her go," I said. I pretended my voice didn't crack. I was good at self-delusion. "I will never force any of you to stay."

Ours was a Mad Love.

Mine was born of their aid at my lowest points, of knowing them for a year of their lives, of my own twisted mentality.

Their love for me was fostered unnaturally fast by Dragon Aura and the various benefits of the Catalogue. A tool created for interdimensional sex slavery. Just because I refused to 'seal the deal' with permanent mind control didn't mean I ever forgot what our relationship had been built on.

An illusion. A Dream.

And we must all wake up someday.

When you throw in the fact that they had a highly sanitized image of me, problems were bound to creep up. Expectations met reality, and they did not line up perfectly.

I called them 'wives,' and they called me 'husband,' but our full relationship was only months old.

It was still fragile. It had barely been tested. With so many people and so many personalities, rifts were bound to form.

You can love someone and not be with them. Just as you could fight with someone and still love them.

A good relationship is not one that has never been challenged but one that weathers all challenges.

I had to believe that our own brand of Mad Love would survive this.

Taking a deep breath and giving Medea a tummy rub, I looked to the other 'heroes' in my Family.

Raven's face was completely blank, her eyes closed as she meditated on my words. With her absorption of Trigon, I knew her outward loss of control was a thing of the past, so I couldn't get a feel for her thoughts. She could be completely unaffected or amid an existential crisis right now.

I would have to leave her to it.

Artoria stared at me intensely, her eyes not wavering for an instant. More than any of the others, she understood the burden of the hard choice. Of making unpalatable decisions for reasons that seemed monstrous or unfeeling.

'The King does not understand human feelings.'

The dedication to an ideal over humanity. A Ruler was an impartial decision-maker. Feelings did not enter into it.

I don't think what I had done was 'Justice,' but it also wasn't wholly divorced from doing the most good for the largest amount of people.

It was insanity, but it was a logical insanity.

Maybe she understood that.

Artoria gave me the nod, the barest of acknowledgements that she understood my monstrosity.

Then she stood and left too.

I looked around the room, wondering if anybody else would leave.

Nobody stood.

Priscilla looked between me and the door my wives had just left with a distressed look.

"They're not gone forever," I gently told my Floofy Dragon as Medea rubbed against me, purring softly. "Sometimes you need space to think."

Sometimes, the people we love change. Sometimes, they were never who we thought they were in the first place.

When that happened, you always had a choice to make.

I just had to trust them to come back.

I had seen Diana fingering her bracers after she left. She hadn't discarded our little symbol of affection outright, so I was honestly hopeful. And I would fight for her.

But right now, she needed space and time to think. That was why Artoria had left, so her friend wouldn't be alone.

"I honestly thought I would get more than one slap," I joked, looking around the room. "I figured there'd be a lineup. I did keep this from you all for a few months."

"I once had a mission," Glynda said, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "Salem unleashed dozens of mutant Chill at once. They possessed people, human and faunus alike. So long as a possible host was nearby, they wouldn't die. By the end, no civilians survived. Information was never released to the public for fear of panic. I never talked about it, even to those who were there with me. I understand why you wouldn't want to speak about… this."

"Do not take this the wrong way," Robin said, her mouth half upturned in that smirk I so loved to let me know she, too, was joking. "But stories like that are a dime a dozen in my world. Entire islands have been wiped from the map for much lesser reasons."

"Eh," Yoruichi jumped on the effort to lower the tension in the room by reclining in her chair and kicking up her feet. "I was the main assassin for Soul Society for over a century. Get on my level."

"I also have done plenty I am not proud of for much worse reasons," Tsunade said, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. "But throwing blame around or losing ourselves in a pity party will not help our situation."

"I agree," I nodded easily. I hadn't said all of that to receive pity or to create drama. They needed to understand not just who I was but what we were dealing with. "And don't get me wrong, I hope I don't have to go on another hunt. We have so many more options now that I didn't have Yharnam. I can Free people from the Old Blood without killing them as I did with Pryor. I will, to anybody who needs it. But I can only do that to one or two people at a time because I have to be touching them."

That was one of the two major limiting factors I was facing.

My expression of Freedom and Life was so deeply tied to my sense of identity that I couldn't escape that limit. If I used my full Avatar, with its hundreds of tentacles and such, I could move much faster through the population at the cost of their brains dribbling out their ears.

But that wouldn't fix the second and most significant issue I faced.

"They have to want to be Free. You cannot force Freedom on people. That is just tyranny by another name. And some people will want to retain the power the Old Blood

brings. Or they cannot consciously choose, like baby-Cable. As I said, the Blood is a categorically good thing for everything but humanity. Those who hunt, who use their bodies to engage in bloodshed, turn into beasts because beasts are better hunters. Those who use their minds to search for truth, for understanding of the world, will gain Insight."

"Is Insight not a desirable trait?" Ranni asked.

"Eh~" I waived my hand in a so-so gesture while the other scratched Medea at the base of her tail. "Insight is nothing more or less than the ability to see and understand the world's true nature. Which, by itself, isn't really bad, but it opens people up to the wider world. Eventually, unless they have cheats like a Great One supporting them or Defences, anyone who gains enough Insight will eventually be confronted by something they can't handle. It will stop being 'Insight' and become 'Frenzy.' They will become kin, closer in nature to Great Ones, but still mutated abominations. Neither that nor beasthood is good for 'humanity.' So long as even one person has the Old Blood, there is always a risk of another outbreak."

I wouldn't get into the likes of bloodlines like Vilebloods, Ashen Blood, or other 'genealogical' mutations that largely kept human forms but became as twisted on the inside as others were on the outside. Ideally, this entire issue would be handled long before that became a problem.

One way or the other.

"We first need to find a way to identify anyone infected that doesn't involve cutting them open," Robin listed off on her fingers. "Then we need to find a way of extracting the Old Blood without killing them. And we have to do this in the millions, possibly billions."

"And do not forget this might be a plan by our enemy to distract us once more," Melina reminded me. "We still need to discover what happened to the disappeared heroes."

"Yep," I said, popping the 'P' for emphasis. "That about sums it up. As of right now, my best plan is to go on international television and the internet and tell people that a plague was released, but they can get a cure by touching my true body. That will let me Free millions of people at once. But it won't be thorough. Some people won't be able to make it to me, so I will have to go around the world personally to free them. I will do that anyway to clear the bodies of water from infection, but it will take too long, and I won't get everyone. Just one person could go back to places I have already visited and reinfect everyone. I bet there are hundreds of big and small villains who would do just that."

"How much time do we have?" Scathach asked. "With enough time, I might be able to work with my Element enough to distinguish Old Blood from regular."

"I honestly do not know," I admitted. "Yharnam trundled on for decades. There were

various outbreaks of the beast plague, some so bad that entire city sections were closed off, but the city continued. Every time a beast plague erupted, they'd call a hunt. Which led to bloodshed, which led to more beasts, and the cycle continued in a downward spiral. By the time I arrived, it was already a city of the dead and dying."

"We are dealing with way more people," Robin said with narrowed eyes. "We will have much less time before a collapse because the number of beasts will be much higher, even if the ratio to infected is much lower. The larger number of beasts will lead to more people fighting them, dying or turning into beasts themselves. We will not have decades. We might not even have years."

"It isn't all bad," I couldn't help but point out. While I wanted them to understand the seriousness of the situation, I did not want them to fall into fatalism. "The people of Yharnam were stuck fighting the beast at close range, leading to the Blood spreading with each kill. Here, even if one bullet won't kill a beast, automated weaponry or military machinery will. Not even counting on Supers, we have ways of killing from a distance that greatly lowers the threat."

"But cities, where the highest concentration of people and beasts, will not be able to use the most effective of those tools without civilian casualties," Yoruichi shook her head.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I smiled despite Diana and Artoria not being there.

Yes, I might not have a solution myself, but none of my Family were anything less than women of action. Now that they knew the problem, we could work together to fix it. There was hope.

Case in point, I saw Priscilla raise her hand shyly, and I looked at her in question.

"Sir Bard," my Floof Dragon said slowly as if hesitating to even voice her thoughts. "Is it not so that the worlds thee visited, such as mine own and the source of this scourge, are video games? And in the manor?"

"All except Elden Ring," I nodded at Ranni and Melina. "It hadn't been released in my world before I appeared in the cell. Playing Bloodborne would be a good idea if you want to grasp Yharnam and what we're dealing with. Just remember it is not a one-to-one comparison. That is a game with limits on what you can do as a player and what is shown. And much of the story and lore comes through details never spelled out clearly. A huge chunk of what I know is pieced together from the community and never explicitly stated."

I had no problem if any of my wives wanted to play the games that I so loved. I was honestly surprised they had yet to.

Then again, Priscilla was the only one who enjoyed games, and even then, she preferred fighting and multiplayer games.

Dark Souls and Bloodborne were also not the type of game I would start a newb on.

"But…" Again, Priscilla hesitated, looking at me with almost pitying eyes. "Is it not an example we can use to illustrate the threat the Old Blood poses? So more visit thy true body?"

"You… want to stream Bloodborne?" I asked, blinking in surprise at the idea.

I don't know why I was surprised. More than anyone here, I had seen plenty of videos on Fromsoft's games. It was practically part of the games themselves, the sense of community that comes from videos or forum posts.

"If thy words of warning fall upon deaf ears," Priscilla nodded, more decisively this time. "Perhaps a visual would aid thy message. Mine only fear is that…"

"That I wouldn't want people to see what I went through," I nodded, understanding where her hesitation was coming from now.

"I do not wish to remind thee of past trauma," Priscilla said gently. "But I do wish to be of aid in some small manner."

"It's a good idea," I reassured her. "And I am not ashamed of what happened. Nor was my time in Bloodborne wholly traumatic. It was a tough time for me, yes, and I did things I am not happy about, but it wasn't all bad."

While I hadn't enjoyed needing to purge Yharnam, to destroy it down to a man to try and wipe the Old Blood from the face of the Earth, that had not been what the vast majority of my time in that world consisted of.

With gleeful abandon, I had slain my way through the Victorian alleys of Bloodborne.

Just me, my weapons, and the Hunt.

It had been an escape from the rage and fear of my past and future.

I had found joy in that terrible place. The beauty of the dance, the whirlwind of death and blood.

In many ways, I had become just as blood-drunk as every hunter before me. I had found an ecstasy in the carnage, in the bloodshed.

I had 'cleaned' Yharnam after I had finished off Mergo and the Hunter's Nightmare, but before descending to the chalice dungeons. By that point, I was fast, strong, deadly, and tireless. I had absorbed so many echoes of blood that I was able to hunt the city clean in a matter of days.

Those few who had not already been claimed by the beasts or the nightmares fell to me over a little more than a week of effort.

It was still in hundreds, possibly thousands, of people who would have survived without my presence. I hadn't exaggerated what I had to do to ensure the Old Blood did not continue to spread.

But even if the memory of those days of killing innocent people weighed on me, it was only a fraction of the seven weeks I spent in that blood-soaked world.

Before, as I cleared Yharnam of beast and kin, and after, as I plumed the depth of the dungeons, were times of deadly, bloody, terrifying joy.

The fear of death, the excitement of combat, the wonders and horror of all I saw and did…

I might have been afraid, so terribly afraid, of what would become of me after I summoned Emma, but that fear had pushed me like nothing ever before.

Damn me, but I had loved Bloodborne.

I was no one special. I had gorged on blood just as everyone else did.

The only difference between me and every other hunter was that I knew what I was doing, and I would not stay around to inflict my beasthood upon the rest of the world.

There was a reason I had killed the Moon Presence, not with one of my innumerable weapons but with my own Beast Claws.

That was one of the reasons Miyazaki's worlds always connected with me.

Only in the darkest depths can you see the light at its clearest.

Even amid despair, fear, pain, disgust and trauma, you can always find a sense of beauty if you look.

Even if all that is beautiful is the bloody dance of violence.

Damn me, but despite all I had to do and face, I had loved Bloodborne.

"If we do decide to go with the 'warning everyone' plan, go right ahead and stream it," I nodded, smiling gently at the fidgeting crossbreed. "We might even be able to raise awareness with the upcoming concert. 'Experience a part of the Elden Lord's journey! See the terrible results if the Blood Plague is allowed to spread!' For now, let's table that plan with my own. As I said, I don't know if other plans will work better. So far, we've had an advantage over the beings of this world because we are Out-of-context people. We operate on different rules. This is also an out-of-context problem. We aren't in Bloodborne. We aren't completely bound to its rules."

"Let's take this one step at a time," Tsunade nodded at Scathach and Medea, the latter of which had been lost in thought for a while now. "For now, we'll work with Amelia on identifying the infected that does not involve bleeding them. Even if we can't cure them ourselves, knowing who needs to be cured will be a massive leg up."

"A good first step," I nodded. "I have to talk to Batman. I promised to give him information. Maybe he'll have a solution. Before that, I need to make a quick stop. Emma, you're with me."

My 'secretary,' utterly silent until now, nodded and rose to join me.

“Ranni, Yoruichi and I will search for clues for the missing heroes,” Robin also stood. “There may be a clue in the Sanctum Sanctorum, so we’ll stop there first.”

“Let Medea know if you run into magic, you think you can’t handle.” Ranni nodded at my advice.

I wasn’t worried about their ability to overcome wards or the like, but we wouldn’t gain much information from a smouldering wreck if they were forced to go all out to defend themselves.

“I do not believe I will be much help with either endeavour,” Glynda said. “I will aid the Amazons with rebuilding. If they do not wish my help, I will continue my reconstruction efforts from Heartbreak.”

Melina looked between the other parties in the Family and me. I didn’t need to know her for decades to understand that she was unsure how to help.

Until she gained more control over the Phoenix Force, or we needed something set on fire, she was more a liability than a help in delicate matters.

There was still something she could do, however.

“I am going to need you to act as a go-between for Valeria and us,” I told her. “Brief her on what I’ve told you, our situation, and that it might be a plot by her enemy. Tell her our first priority is finding a way to cure people that doesn’t involve slaughtering them, and our second is to track every single shipment of ‘Sanguine’ that ever existed. Those centers of distribution will also be the centers of an outbreak. Ideally, the smartest girl in the world will Deus Ex a vaccine for Old Blood, but I will settle for getting everything we can out of Sinister’s records. Just let me know if she has questions you can’t answer.”

“Very well,” my maiden nodded.

“And I?” Priscilla asked, eager to help.

“I needed you to keep an ear to the digital ground,” I told her. “Forums, social media, news outlets, check all of it for mentions of Sanguine, odd beasts, brutal killings, or a sudden onslaught of blood-based Supers. Again, those will be early signs of an outbreak of the Beast Plague.”

Priscilla nodded seriously, clenching her fists in determination.

I turned from the cute display, worried I would gain Dragon Diabetes, and faced the room as a whole.

“While we are working, we need to be brainstorming ideas. The Hunt is my last option, but it is one I will take. So please do not force me to take it.”

“What of…” Emma trailed off, not finishing the question.

She didn’t need to.

“They’ll be back,” I said, looking at the still-meditating Raven. “And they will do more

good out there, being heroes, than with us now. Let's give them some time. They'll be back."

They had to come back.

How would we survive eternity together if our Family could not survive this?

I shook off the thought and the melancholy and got my head back in the game.

Right now, I have an unannounced appointment with our dear head of the PRT.

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In the darkness of space, well beyond the bounds of Earth's solar system, a portal opened with a cracking 'BOOM' that was lost to the silence of the void.

The passage was utterly invisible in the dark void, existing for only a second.

Just as unnoticed, if still visible, was the humanoid that flew through it in the few moments it was opened.

Guardian did not turn to look at Earth or even so much as blink as he jettisoned into the depths of space toward the Shi'ar homeworld.

Author's Note:

As always, the standard disclaimer is that this is just my understanding of Bloodborne Lore. Like all of From's games, much is left up to interpretation. For those unfamiliar with the game, I hope I have conveyed things clearly enough to grasp the situation.

One thing rarely mentioned in fanfiction, let alone Waifu Catalogue fics is that love is not a cure-all. You can love someone, and they can love you, but sometimes, differences are too much to overcome. The Catalogue guarantees 'love,' it does not guarantee 'happiness.' You have to fight for your happiness.

Diana has gotten a lot of screen time in this fic, more than almost all the others, but I hope it is apparent why. Of the Family, she is the one that clashes the most ideologically with Mikael. Their relationship is young, new and raw. I cannot see a world where the character I have written so far can hear Mikael's story and not react. I just hope I am conveying their feelings, as I understand them, about each other and the situation in an understandable way.

Either way, I will see you all next week.

DREAM III

"Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her: but once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game."
-Voltaire

"Are you here to kill me?"

"I haven't decided," I admitted easily.

"Don't expect me to beg."

Despite finding me here, Amanda Waller walked into her office with all the Bad Bitch Energy I expected of her.

For maximum disrespect, I was in her chair, my feet on her desk. Yet she stared me down as if expecting me to move.

I didn't.

"I should joke about 'No, I expect you to die,'" I said in my best Goldfinger impression. "But to tell you the truth, I'm not in the mood. So I will just ask this. How did you get the animals off my Island?"

Sinister hadn't cared how the woman in front of me had gotten him his samples so long as she did. And any hopes of records were lost when Cadmus was destroyed. Confronting the woman was the fastest way to get that information.

If there was a hole in my defences, I needed to find it and plug it.

"You want information," Waller narrowed her eyes at me. "I do, too. An exchange."

I blinked.

Sitting up and putting my feet on the ground, I stared at the woman in front of me.

"Are you serious?" I asked, incredulous.

"I need to know what happened to the heroes you took," Waller nodded. "The Avengers and every other PRT team that disappeared in that Hall. Until you agree, I won't tell you anything. Torture me, kill me, I won't talk."

I blinked again.

She was serious. Amanda Waller was seriously trying to negotiate with me.

Unlike Luthor, who had been cautious but polite, Waller treated this like my intrusion in her office was nothing more than an inconvenience. She wasn't happy but willing to use the situation to her advantage.

A part of me admired the balls on this woman. Or the ovaries, in this case.

A much bigger part of me was fucking pissed.

"You're too used to dealing with heroes or prisoners. I am neither. I should kill you

and interrogate your ghost. The dead have looser lips than the living."

I saw her tense, her hand instinctively reaching out behind her to no doubt grab a weapon.

Then Waller stopped, likely realizing how pointless such an action would be.

She scowled at me.

"Why don't you then?"

She was trying to call my bluff. I hadn't killed her yet, so there must be a reason she was still alive.

In a way, I was bluffing. I had no way of forcing the dead to talk. They tended not to keep secrets, but if they were stubborn, I couldn't do anything to them. They were already dead.

But Waller was making a mistake.

I already had what I wanted.

I just needed to bring it to the forefront of her mind, and Emma, hidden under an illusion beside me, would pull it from her mind.

Now, I was just deciding what to do.

"Just tell me why," I sighed, wishing I had Medea to rub her tubby tummy. "I warned everyone. If anything from my home gets out, it would risk the end of the world. I stressed it over and over again. I get the first few invaders. I do. Spooky land has always been the call of adventurers. Dr. Fate's bullshit speculation about it being a 'source of power' and I hadn't given any warnings yet. But after weeks of no survivors and repeated warnings, why? Why take the risk?"

"You wouldn't understand," Waller scowled, crossing her arms.

"Try me."

"To protect my planet, my country, and my people."

"By dooming them?"

"By taking every opportunity I can to make them safer! Reality is not kind enough to keep those who will not defend themselves safe."

"You have defenders. Even if you ignore the League or random vigilantes, you are the head of the PRT. You literally have hundreds of Supers at your beck and call!"

"The PRT are glorified babysitters. Our job is to corral children that can destroy cities. When they think they know better, they ignore the law. They play along when it suits them and run around when not. And we have to let them!"

"But why fuck with me? I haven't even broken the law yet."

"Yet. But you will. And when you do, we need to be able to stop you."

"And how'd that work out for you?"

“While the destruction of Cadmus was a failure, the fundamental principles that led to its founding were not wrong. Humanity needs to grow strong enough to defend itself. From villains, vigilantes, and from everything else out there. How long do we have until the next Skrull invasion? How much time do we have until Galactus starts feeling hungry again? When the next Elden Lord comes, what if they just keep flying? Our planet turns to dust, and seven billion people die because we cannot touch him? We cannot let that happen.”

“So you will create your own doom to try and save yourselves from a possibility? Ignoring all the heroes that fight and die just so your miserable little planet, country and people can keep going? Earth isn’t special. There are planets with trillions of lives. There are billions of countries out there. Millions of species. And you would doom them all just because you cannot trust the people who die to save you to do their damn job!”

“And when they fail? When they aren’t there? They couldn’t stop you. They couldn’t stop the Endbringers. And now, they’re who knows where. If I do not do everything I can and take every opportunity, we will die. All of us. And that is unacceptable.”

“You break your own laws, you kill your own people, and you doom everyone else with your folly. You are the worst sort of hypocrite.”

“This is why I said you wouldn’t understand. You have so much power that you cannot understand those who don’t have any. The wolf cannot understand the sheep. When the sheepdogs fail, when the shepherd is gone, the lambs must take drastic action. To safeguard the flock from extinction, every alternative is preferable.”

I glared down at the woman in front of me. I had marched right up to her in my anger, engulfing her figure in my shadow. She glared right back, not intimidated in the least despite the fact I was over a foot taller than her.

“Tell me this then. When I warned everyone, why did you not listen?”

“I am supposed to trust you?”

“Then why not take the power for yourself. You had a few drops of my blood. You knew it made people better. Knew it could make people into Supers. Why did you not take it yourself if you cannot trust heroes? Combine it with the dozens of other ways to gain powers you no doubt know of. If you cannot trust others, make yourself the hero this world needs.”

For the first time since I had arrived in this office, I saw Amanda Waller off balance.

It took me a second to recognize the look.

“You never even thought about it, didn’t you?” I looked at her in realization.

“Irrelevant,” Waller snapped her glare back in place. “One more hero would not make a difference. We need dozens. Hundreds. We need to make the weak strong and the strong

stronger. We need to be able to defend ourselves from empires and monsters that eat planets."

"Armies. Soldiers. That's what you want," I sighed in weariness. "Not heroes. Supers that will fight and die for you, but only under your command. Those are the only people you can trust."

"Not my command, but humanity's command," she rebutted. "We cannot trust our fate to the whims of a percentage of a percentage of the population. Some of which only defend us based on their whims."

"And I am sure humanity's best interest will be best represented by people who look like you, think like you, come from where you do, pray like you do, or act as you do."

Waller glared but didn't answer, knowing there was no correct answer to my sarcastic statement.

She didn't have to.

I had made my decision.

Despite my criticism of Waller, I agreed with much of what she was arguing for.

By definition, any world I entered would not be 'canon.' There was no guarantee the heroes would always win. No writer made sure everything had a happy ending. No promise of Superman catching Lois Lane in time.

In every world, it was up to the inhabitants to ensure they had a happy ending.

In a world with heroes and villains, doing nothing was the same as entrusting your fate to the whims and abilities of others. You could end up as another statistic on the evening news. Your entire universe could be wiped out in the next 'Crisis' or multiverse collapse that comics are so fond of.

Had I been in Waller's situation, I would have done something similar. I wasn't so hypocritical to not recognize that I wouldn't have trusted me either, had I been in her place. Searching for a tactic against a foe already defeating you is common sense.

There was a significant difference between her and me, though.

I was an egoist.

It had screwed me over a thousand times in the past and would screw me over in the future.

My arrogance had doomed me to centuries of prison and eons of inactivity.

Her arrogance had doomed what she sought to protect.

I gambled with myself. I would take the radioactive spider bite, the super soldier serum, or the experimental surgery. I'd break my Walls or die trying.

Either I'd be Free, or I'd cease to be.

Waller gambled what was not hers to gamble. Either she succeeded, or everyone

would pay the price. She'd force the serum on others. If a Wall was in her way, Amanda Waller would have others tear it down for her.

I was an individualist born into a world that rewarded collective effort.

She was a collectivist born into a world that rewarded individualist effort.

Only one of us had escaped our worlds.

"I am going to give you a chance to live," I said solemnly.

"What gives you the right to decide whether I live or die?" Waller glared at me, undaunted, even now.

"Power," I answered simply. "You were right about that. The strong do what they will. The weak suffer what they must."

"You are no better than any other villain," she snarled.

"I am not," I agreed. "I am just me. Now stop delaying. If you haven't caught on yet, nobody is coming in here. You aren't getting rescued. I made sure of that before you arrived. No cameras will catch this, no signal will ring, and those alarms disguised as your sleeve buttons have not sent out any message."

Waller glared at me, but she didn't run.

I'd give her this. She was no coward.

Another difference between us.

"What do I have to do?"

"I am going to show you what you have unleashed on this world," I said simply. I won't lie. I was appreciating the irony of what I was about to do.

"Give me my gun, and I'll take on however many monsters you want to throw at me."

"You misunderstand," I chuckled. "I won't be throwing you into a coliseum, just a memory. You won't be fighting anything. You won't even have to do anything yourself. Just last long enough to wake up."

"Wake up?" Amanda Waller's glare, present this entire time, took on a more suspicious edge.

"Oh, don't you worry," I nodded gently with a smile. "Whatever happens… You may think it all a mere bad dream…"

My hand, altogether void of its human shell, clamped on Amanda Waller's skull. Half-real tentacles wrapped around her head as her eyes slowly, gently, closed in slumber.

I kindly carried her to her desk chair, placing her in it comfortably.

"What did you do to her?"

"She's just Dreaming," I told Emma. "I may just be an infant Great One, but putting one person in a Dream is well within my abilities. More so if I am just replaying my own memories."

“Was that wise?”

“I am not showing her anything to do with our Family or my ascension,” I nodded. “Apart from that, she is in my Nightmare. She will see what I saw. Feel what I felt. But she will not have any of my thoughts or memories. A passenger in my body with her own mind. If she survives all seven weeks in Bloodborne, she will wake up with no injuries and a few dozen points of insight, but that is all. A kindness she probably doesn’t deserve for potentially dooming this universe.”

“Do you honestly think she will make it,” Emma asked.

“I hope she does. Once Waller sees what we are dealing with, she will be a good ally in doing damage control. Having her incommunicado for a few weeks will give us time to plan. The PRT and protectorate lost both their leaders. They won’t bother us for a little bit. When she returns, we can use her position to direct PRT efforts. Hopefully, by then, we’ll have found our missing heroes.”

Part punishment, part educational briefing, and part long-term plan. I loved solutions like this.

“Killing her would have been kinder,” Emma said, but it didn’t sound like she was complaining about the punishment; she was just stating a fact.

“I didn’t die once in Bloodborne. And it is only seven weeks. If I was being cruel, I would have put her in Dark Souls,” I chuckled at the thought. “Besides, if she doesn’t see what we are facing firsthand, she will work against us, not with us. She’s the type to only trust things she can control, but also willing to make a deal with the devil if it means keeping her people safe.”

“She will not make it,” Emma said firmly. “No matter what you think, not everyone can go through what you did.”

“I think she will. Waller’s a certified badass in most timelines, even if she’s a stone-cold bitch. A little blood and horror won’t break her.”

“She’ll feel what you felt? Your emotions?” I nodded at her question. “Then I guarantee she will not make it.”

“…I did.”

“Amanda Waller is not Mikael. Her mind, her will, is only…”

Human.

That was what Emma stopped herself from saying.

“…That’s why I am being kind,” I said softly after the awkward pause. “She’s getting a better deal than I did. At least if she gives up, she will be able to die.”

That had been the worst part about Bloodborne, one of the reasons it had stuck with me just as much as the Kiln despite experiencing so little pain compared to the other

worlds.

I had lost Melina. My plan to escape in Elden Ring had failed. I had stared down endless worlds that would be my prisons if I didn't escape. I would have to face down my deepest fear and let Emma into my mind to make that escape. I would have to kill thousands of civilians to try and give that world hope of survival after I left.

Through it all, every brutal murder, every eldritch horror, every minute of fear for my identity, anger at my situation, and blood-drunk frenzy, I was perfectly, maddeningly, painfully sane.

No matter how much I tried to lose myself, to become the beast to escape, I never could.

I could feel all the bloodlust of a monster, all the despair of an undead, yet never give in to them.

I could never go beast.

I could never go hollow.

That simple right, humanity's one privilege, had been denied me.

Because of my preparation, because of Diana's Order, and now, because of my own choices.

I let myself wallow for a moment.

But just a moment.

This was not the Cell, the Kiln, or Yharnam.

I was Free.

"Let's grab lunch," I said, shaking my head clear of the fugue. "I'm in the mood for sushi. You can tell me what you found, then we can talk to Batman."

"After we do, let's have Medea scry for any of your blood that is still out there," Emma said as I teleported us to Japan for a meal. "I don't like that they had a few drops."

"To be fair, the Defences prevent cloning, poisoning, cursing, or other nefarious things they would usually use it for," I said with a smile. "But yes, we should do that. Even if a bunch of mini-mes running around causing chaos would be absolutely hilarious."

"You say that now," Emma rolled her eyes. "Clones are always a headache and a half. I loved my Cuckoos, but the mischief they got up to with my face… It was a trial."

"But imagine: a dozen or so clones, a command seal to give you the power to link our minds together, and suddenly, everyone gets their own Mikael. Or two. Or three. One mind, multiple bodies."

My limitations on having one Avatar would probably prevent that, but I was fucking with Emma, so the actual logistics were less important than what I could put in her head.

"That would just give you more opportunities for your terrible sense of humour,"

Emma said haughtily.

"You can't tell me you haven't imagined me with Robin's power before." I grinned evilly as I stepped closer to her, close enough that my breath tickled her ear. "Three me's. One you. I could make you airtight."

Emma paused mid-step, her eyes going hazy and her breath hitching.

I laughed, dancing away from her and towards the hole-in-the-wall restaurant I had chosen and held the door for my wife as she got her salacious fantasies under control.

"Now tell me the details you got from Waller. I bet it was some sort of Suicide Squad thing, wasn't it?"

******

Amanda Waller would be found peacefully sleeping in her office less than an hour later. When efforts to rouse her failed, she was carted off to a medical facility and an investigation was launched.

No sign of forceful entry or proof of malfeasance ever appeared. There was no wound on her body, no sign of any poison in her blood. Even the Supers and magic specialists called in to check up on her told the investigators the same thing everyone else was saying.

She was just sleeping.

Within a medical bed, strapped to the best machines medicine could buy to keep her alive, Amanda Waller Dreamed for twenty-four days and nights.

While the cause of her coma-esque state would forever remain a mystery, the cause of death was easy to diagnose.

Her heart had stopped.

Not from a heart attack. It just stopped.

Like it had decided to give up.

Amanda Waller would be buried with her lost children and husband. She had no surviving relatives.

When I heard, I visited the site of her death.

The ghost of a woman who had stared me down, who would glare down gods and dragons alike for her beliefs, who had kept some of the worst criminals this world had produced on leashes and faced death with her back straight, was not there.

The shape of the spirit I found was the same; her muscles hadn't atrophied, and she had been well cared for while she Dreamed.

Everything that made her 'Amanda Waller' was gone, though.

All I found was a crumpled, huddled thing. A wretch of a human remnant.

The soul looked back at the world with vacant eyes, seeing none of it.

There was an emptiness in that gaze that wasn't present with the other dead in this hospital.

Yet the feeling it gave off was of such profound relief that I instinctively knew this soul would never speak a word to me or anything else living.

Death was its salvation, its reward, and it would remain with the dead until the multiverse collapsed.

Amanda Waller, famed for her stubbornness and iron-hard willpower, gave up in less than four weeks.

Less than half.

What did that make me?

I left.

I wasn't even angry at the dead woman anymore.

I was just tired.

******

"How long are you going to run away from the problem?"

"Excuse me?" Diana asked Yoruichi, setting down her burden.

The apartment building hit the ground with an earth-shaking rumble. The frame held it together in one piece, but huge chunks of debris fell from the hole in the wall the villain had torn open. Diana had intended to place it a little further from the city, with the other destroyed buildings, but this would work just as well. It was only out here until Glynda had a moment.

"You heard me," the dark-skinned woman said, hopping to sit on the ruin and look down at the Amazon while she kicked her feet. "How long are you going to keep running away?"

"I am not running away from anything," Diana said, turning from Yoruichi. She intended to return to the city to continue helping clear the wreckage from the battle with Bizarro.

"Glynda and Medea are helping Artoria with the cleanup. They should be done in a minute and will meet us at home," Yoruichi said, appearing in the air in front of the heroine in a burst of speed. "Before that, we needed to talk to you."

"We?" Diana asked, looking around.

She spotted the approaching woman instantly. The sand from her passage left a clear

trail through the desert outside Vegas.

“I will remind you that I am still unable to travel as fast as you all,” Melina, enveloped in a fiery aura that flickered in the light, said as she flew up to the pair. She glared at Yoruichi, who looked entirely unrepentant, as she steadied herself in the air with them.

“Think of it as an incentive to train harder,” Yoruichi grinned at the Phoenix Host before looking back at Diana and setting her face back into a neutral, almost hostile expression. “Now answer my question.”

“I did,” Diana said, crossing her arms. “I am not running from anything.”

“You have not been home in three days,” Melina stated. Not an accusation, just a fact. Unlike Yoruichi, her gaze was without judgment.

“I’ve been busy,” Diana said honestly.

A massive chunk of the hero population of the US and the League had disappeared in a moment. Not only that, they were some of their hardest hitters. She was doing the work of at least a dozen heroes, and there were still incidents she couldn’t reach in time to be of significant help.

And most villains weren’t aware of the vacancy as it hadn’t been made public. Once they learned of their opportunity, crime rates would explode.

“Artoria made it to dinner.”

Diana couldn’t hide the wince at the Shinigami’s words.

Mikael had supported their desire to be heroes, as well as everyone else’s desires, hobbies, and plans and had only asked for one thing. A meal, once a day, where they could all eat together.

It didn’t have to be dinner, and it didn’t have to be long, but it had been one of Mikael’s only requests. Baring a few emergencies, everyone had been able to make at least one meal a day ever since they had arrived on Earth.

Until recently.

For a long moment, nobody said anything.

“Did he send you?” Diana eventually asked, flying back down to the building. She set herself down where she had cut it from its foundation to carry it away.

“No,” Melina denied as she floated down as well. “He won’t do anything until you make a decision for yourself. Whatever that is.”

“The only thing that scares him more than you leaving is the idea of forcing you to stay,” Yoruichi said, plopping herself beside the Amazon. “Which is insane. I don’t think he could force us to stay. We can fight the seals. Especially not Di.”

“He could,” Melina denied. “Remember, our Defences come from him. All he would have to do is remove them, give Emma a command seal or two, free her from her limits,

and we would agree to anything."

Diana looked at her bracers, slipping the metal away to fiddle with the leather underneath. A reminder of her time with her husband.

As always, they sent a flutter of emotions through her.

"Huh," Yoruichi grunted. "She'd do it too. I'm pretty sure Ice Queen likes us, but there is no contest if it's that or going against him. That is a horrifying thought I hadn't had before. Thanks for that."

"You are welcome," Melina responded, ignoring the sarcasm in the other woman's voice. "It is irrelevant, though. He would never do that."

"The greatest freedom is being able to choose who you give up your freedom to," Diana said, partly to herself, partly to the women. Then she looked at them. "Do you two ever wonder where we are going?"

They both looked at her, Melina with a blank expression but Yoruichi with a raised brow.

"We're going home," she said as if it should be obvious. "Tits is cooking dinner tonight, and we're all going to be there. You too."

"I meant in the future," Diana shook her head, still fiddling with the small bits of leather on her wrists. "In a year. In ten. In a thousand. In a billion."

"That is a bit out of my prediction range," Yoruichi drawled. "I'm more of a day-to-day girl. Maybe a century or two. The oldest person in my world was only a few thousand years old, so I don't think about that far in the future either."

"I've been thinking about it a lot," Diana admitted. "Ever since Heartbreak and Tsunade got pregnant. What we're building. Where we're going. Who we will be. How our little Family will look like, and who will be with us. Who won't be."

"Unless Mikael dies, we all will be," Melina said.

"No," Diana denied. "Not all of us. Not everyone can handle the weight of time. I saw it with some of my sisters in my home world. They didn't kill themselves. They just… stop. Life just isn't worth it anymore. Even right now, one of us has already reached that point."

"Scathach."

"She does not intend to die soon," Diana nodded. "But after we've scoured the multiverse after she's seen and fought all she wants, she still wants to fight Mikael and die at his hands."

"He will do everything to change her mind," Melina pointed out.

"He will succeed," the Amazon agreed. "For a thousand years. Ten thousand. Maybe a million. But eventually, he will fail. And he will be forced to make that choice. And he will let her go, let her rest. Because we are Free."

“You don’t want him to?”

“I am glad he can let her go, let me go if I were to ask…”

“But?” Yoruichi prompted as Diana fell to silence.

“What happens when Tsunade wants to join her children? What happens when Glynda loses one student too many? Sure, he can bring them back, but how long will they want to come back? What will he do when Robin no longer finds the universe’s mysteries worth investigating? What happens when, one by one, we leave him?”

“A few of us never will,” Melina said firmly, the fiery aura of the Phoenix Force flaring around her despite the placid look on her face.

“I know,” Diana sighed. “I don’t intend to either. There will always be people that need heroes. I knew my battles would never end when I first left my Island. Artoria is the same. Our sense of justice may cause us to argue, but it is also why I can say with certainty that we will never ask him to release us. We aren’t the only ones. Emma will never leave him. Ever.”

“Then he won’t be alone,” Yoruichi said. “And so long as he lives, neither will we. So stop worrying about it for now. Our Family is weird; it will grow, shrink, and change, but none of us ever need to be alone.”

“I believe that is the problem.”

There was a moment of silence at Diana’s words.

Eventually, Melina asked the question.

“Why did you slap him, Diana? Why did you leave, and why do you not want to return?”

“It wasn’t because of his plan, was it?” Yoruichi words were phrased as a question. It wasn’t. “Not that he killed people, that he killed innocent people, or that he would have to do so again here was it?”

“It wasn’t,” Diana gave a pained smile. “I don’t like it. I will fight to avoid it. But sometimes, the only cure for a disease is to cut off the infection. I can’t say I wouldn’t have done something different if I only had the options he had then. Hades, I don’t know if either of you two have read any of the ‘comics’ in the library or seen the other media based on versions of my world, but other versions of myself have done much worse for far less noble intentions. I would only have had a problem if he insisted it was the only solution and refused to look for ways to save the infected.”

“He’s not,” Yoruichi’s eyes had progressively narrowed. “So what is the problem?”

“…Did you see his face while he was talking?”

“We were there,” Yoruichi answered sarcastically as Melina let out an ‘Ah’ of acknowledgement. The Shinigami looked at the Kindling Maiden in question. “You know

what she is talking about?"

"It is something I had noticed before," Melina nodded. "I have communicated my concern to Medea. We had believed it to be in relation to his Avatar's nature as a Great One. A mindset related to his power."

"It's not," Diana shook her head. "I saw his Avatar when he was fighting the Gods. He had no problem being his usual self."

"I thought it was because of what he had to do in Bloodborne," Yoruichi admitted. "He clearly didn't like what he did, even if he thought it necessary. I'd find it weirder if he was his usual self while talking about it."

"Neither of you two were summoned while he was in Bloodborne," Diana shook her head. "Scathach, Medea, Me, Tsunade, Artoria, and Glynda were. Raven was the last in Elden Ring, and Emma was the one he was waiting for. I remember it clearly because it has only been a few months since then. He was covered in blood, his clothes were torn to shreds, and he looked half feral. I had never seen him so enervated before. They weren't good emotions. Rage. Fear. Pain. But they were strong. Like he was glaring the world down. He wasn't like… that."

"He's been through a lot," Yoruichi tried to shrug casually. It came off as stiff. "We all have. We all have our problems. What is a bit of PTSD between friends?"

"I do not believe it is so. In my world, he had quiet moments," Melina said gently. "Like all emotion drained from him. But they were rare things, once every few years. And once he snapped out of them, he always recognized what happened. I am not sure he notices when he does it now."

"Maybe the others saw something you missed," Yoruichi proposed to Diana. "You were third summoned. Maybe it happened, ya know, after he had to do what he did?"

"Artoria told me he was similar when she was summoned. I asked," Diana shook her head. "Worse off physically, but his emotions were even more potent. And only Glynda and Emma were after. So it wasn't his… solution to the plague that caused him to look like that. No, I think something else is the problem. And I think it is why he and Emma have had issues since his release."

"…She wanted to say something after you left," Yoruichi said slowly. "Mikael stopped her. She wasn't surprised by his actions."

"He hasn't hidden a thing from her since he's been free," Melina shook her head. "Even when they are fighting, she knows the most about him. Even more than I."

"I think…" Diana paused, trying to put the thoughts she'd been mulling over in the last few days into words. "I think something happened between them. Either when she went into his mind to free him or after. Do you remember that dinner when we finished

scouting this Earth? She seemed shocked by something. At the time, I believed it to simply be his promise to support us instead of having plans of his own. Emma is an ambitious woman, so I believed it was the lack of ambition on his part that caused their conflict. But after seeing him like that, I had another idea."

"Like what," Yoruichi asked, leaning forward, fully engaged in this conversation.

"What if…" Diana hesitated to even say her following words. "What if the problem is us? What if he wanted me to leave?"

There was a moment of silence.

Then Yoruichi broke it.

"That's stupid," she deadpanned. "You saying he was trying to chase you off? After everything? I don't know if you've noticed, Princess, but that man is head over heels in love with you. With all of us. And after everything he's done to support us, support you? He'd fight tooth and nail to keep you with him. I'd bet my life on it."

"I know," Diana nodded, but her face was grave. "I would, too. That is all he has done since he's been Free, right? Support us? The one time he's been angry at us was when he wanted us to take better care of ourselves. He's never truly alone; there's always at least one of Raven's clones in his shadow, and he's with one or more of us most of the time. It is like he has no will. No drive. Like a machine that cannot operate without us. But he doesn't want us to tell him what to do, so it's not like he wants orders to follow. It's like he has no clue what he's doing and just using us to figure out what he wants. That also doesn't make sense. It goes completely against his Freedom."

"What are you saying," Melina asked, her aura a visible corona of light that burned bright even in the desert sun.

"I… I don't know," Diana growled in frustration. "I've been thinking for days and can't think of a clear answer. Over and over. That's why I hit him. Not because of what he did or what happened. I just needed him to stop looking at me like that. Like a beast waiting to be put out of its misery. And when I did? He looked… satisfied. Like he wanted me to hit him. I couldn't stay there after that. I needed to leave."

"You aren't making sense," Yoruichi shook her head. "He wants to be with us but is chasing us off? He both wants to be alone and doesn't? And you haven't seen him these last few days. Every time he sees your empty seat, it's like someone killed his cat."

"I am not saying it makes sense," Diana shook her head. "If it did, I would not have such problems."

"Does it not make perfect sense?" Melina asked with a tilt of her head. "Did he not do the same, if in opposite, while imprisoned? Be kind to you yet wish you would eventually depart?"

Both women froze.

Then Diana shook her head again, running her hand through her dark hair.

“That was because he thought his emotions were not his own. He thought he was being controlled. He was rebelling.”

“I do not mean the motives were the same,” Melina said. “Just the action is. For all his talk of logic, Mikael is a man who moves by emotion. Whims. He only takes ‘logical’ actions because they fit his emotions most of the time. I do not believe he ever truly loses his emotions. He just withdraws within himself. You said it yourself. You saw something in him.”

“Seeing him look at me like that,” Diana shivered. “It is like an entirely different person. Like the man I love is just a mask, and underneath is… that thing. And it isn’t Mikael.”

Because Mikael would never, should never, look like he was begging for death.

“It is,” Melina denied, standing over the Amazon. Both eyes were alight with flame. Literally. “He is that man. That monster. You need to recognize that. We can, and will, find out why he acts the way he does, but that does not change that even if you do not like that part of him, it is a part of him.”

“Ha! Well said. You know, I like you better with the bird. More fire.” Yoruichi exclaimed, shaking her head as she stood and looked down at Diana. “You got scared, Princess. Admit it. Saw something that you didn’t like, and you ran. And you didn’t want to face it again until you could understand it. You forgot what this Family really is, Princess.”

“And what is that?” Diana asked.

“We’re a bunch of losers,” Yoruichi said bluntly. “Our worlds lost. *We* lost. All of us, even Priscilla, Ranni, and Melina. We’re just a bunch of fuck-ups, failures, and exiles. We are just too stubborn to die when given the choice. We’re not heroes. We’re not characters in the comics you read. You found out your husband has a side you didn’t know before. You’ll deal with it. I know you will. Because losers like us need to stick together. We’re the only home we have left.”

Diana stared at the hand Yoruichi extended, then looked at the Shinigami in the eye.

The damn cat had the audacity to wiggle her eyebrows.

“I am still going to find out what is going on,” Diana said, grabbing the woman’s hand and looking at Melina. Yoruichi pulled the heroine to her feet with a roll of her eyes. “You might not be a hero, but I am. We heroes are a nosy bunch.”

“I am already working with Medea and trying to piece together a consistent pattern of when he falls into such a state,” Melina said. “We hadn’t gotten far before Heartbreak and

have been busy since. The more eyes we have on him, the easier it will be."

"You both are missing the obvious solution," Yoruichi sighed.

"You have an idea," Melina asked.

"Watch this."

Yoruichi opened a portal to the Island and stepped through.

After sharing a look, the other two women followed.

"Honey~," Yoruichi sing-songed loudly as she opened the door to the mansion. "We're home~."

"Welcome back," Mikael said as he appeared teleported into the entryway. For half a second, he looked at Diana in surprise, but then his smile widened, and he continued with the joke he no doubt had planned as soon as he heard Yoruichi's bombastic arrival. "Would you like dinner, a bath or…" Mikael put his hand over his cheeks like he was shy as he looked at all three of them. "Maybe…me?"

Maybe it was the relief of seeing him again.

Maybe it was his casual acceptance of her return without question or judgment.

Maybe it was how he looked so alive, so different from the last time she had seen him.

Maybe it was because of the stupid way he batted his eyelashes, like a newlywed bride welcoming her husband home for the first time.

It was probably a combination of all of them that had Diana smiling at the terrible joke.

Yoruichi barked out a laugh, pouncing at Mikael.

He caught her, dropping the joking facade to raise a brow at her in question.

"Princess wants to know why you get quiet sometimes," Yoruichi asked bluntly. "You know, all scary and blank, like a haunted doll?"

Mikael looked at the woman in his arms, then at the other two women who entered with her and their surprised expressions.

He shrugged.

"You ever spend time in the shower thinking up conversations that will never happen? It's like that, only I've been told I look like a serial killer waiting to strike. It's nothing that bad. I just get caught up in my thoughts," Mikael said simply. "It was my default defence when I was a kid. Withdraw when things get bad. I had to fix that if I didn't want to just be the creepy guy that never spoke. As I got older, I got better at faking extroversion by helping distract myself with music, books, or other media. Humour became my defence instead.

I did it for so long that I eventually learned to like it. I didn't have those distractions in my prison, so I did it with music. Sometimes, I slip back into old habits. Follow a train

of thought too deep or wander down memory lane too long. It's not too bad. Once someone points it out, I generally shake it off."

There was a beat of silence.

"That's it?" Yoruichi asked incredulously. "No secret trauma? Dual personality? Not even a spirit sword talking to you? You just turn into a moody introvert?"

"That's about it," Mikael nodded with a laugh. "I do believe everyone is entitled to their 'Emo' moments, but yes. It is that simple. Don't get me wrong, I've gone through a lot more shit since I first woke up in that Cell, so there definitely is trauma there, but nobody is without trauma. I just choose not to dwell on the bad stuff and focus on the good stuff. And it is hard to be a moody, broody asshole when I have a Family filled with beautiful women, power, immortality, wealth, and can travel the multiverse."

"Mrow!"

"And I have the Floofiest of Floofs," Mikael yelled to the meow from deeper in the house, his smile wider than ever. "Can't forget her. But yes, I have it good. I just need to be reminded of that sometimes. People are so obsessed with the bad they forget to look at the good. There are silver linings in everything. So I laugh when I can, even if I do turn into an edge lord every once in a while. If you see me like that, just wake me up. Melina's done it a bunch of times."

Diana looked at the kindling Maiden, who nodded, but her lips were pressed into a line.

Mikael wasn't lying. Or at least Diana didn't think he was.

And it did give her a starting point of why his reaction was to withdraw within himself. But it also told the Amazon that Mikael didn't realize what he was doing. He had a blind spot.

He had said it himself. He had worn his mask so long it had become who he was. Was this the same?

Melina had been right. That… husk she had seen three days ago was a part of Mikael. But did he know that?

"Did that answer your question?" Mikael asked, looking at the three of them. None of them disagreed.

"More or less," Yoruichi shrugged casually.

"Well, feel free to ask me anything." Mikael put on his most innocent look. "I am an open book. No secrets. Even my most depraved thoughts are available to all of you. Shame? What is that? Can I sleep with it?"

Yoruichi snorted a laugh, but Tsunade's voice rang through the house before she could call Mikael out on his BS.

“Food’s ready if everyone’s home.”

“Everyone’s here,” Mikael called back as he jerked his head toward the kitchen at Melina and Diana. Yoruichi flung over his shoulders like a bag of potatoes.

“HEY!” The Shinigami protested, kicking her legs and pounding his back playfully. “Unhand me this instant! I am a head of the Four Noble Families! I will not be treated in such a brutish manner.”

In response to the dark-skinned woman’s protests, Mikael smacked her on the ass.

“Unga-bunga,” he grunted. “Woman. Food. Snu-snu.”

Yoruichi paused her flailing to look at the man carrying her in confusion.

“What’s snu-snu?”

As they pair left, Mikael’s loud laughter bounced off the walls, and Diana and Melina shared a look.

At once, fond exasperation as it was one of worry.

They’d get to the bottom of this eventually.

For now, it was time for Family Dinner.

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The meal was as lively as it ever was. An hour of jokes, laughter, repeated arguments, and enough alcohol to kill a fraternity during a rush.

Diana’s return was putting everyone in good spirits. A tenseness that had been there the last few days had left everyone else’s shoulders.

I hadn’t been worried. I knew she’d be back.

But everyone else had been on edge, so some celebration was called for. Even when the world could fall to a beast plague any minute, we needed little moments like this. We could spare an hour or so before we got to the mess outside.

Artoria was in an eating contest with Medea The Cat over who could consume the most Mochi.

Almost everyone had bet on Artoria. They believed the difference in the size of the mouth and body gave her an advantage.

Suckers.

I bet everything on Medea. I was going to win big.

Mwahahahaha, I had bunny-girl suits for everyone. A plan that had been in the works since Scathach had unintentionally pulled a prank on Batman and the Titans.

So many people will be confused. I could picture the world’s faces in my mind. Chaos would descend.

Mwahahahaha.

Was it a stupid, pointless joke? Yes. Yes, it was.

But it would also give the world something to focus on that wasn't their misery. And it would make my eventual announcement easier to digest.

'I made an oopsie, and there is a plague that will turn everyone into beasts. My bad. But look! Bunny Girls! All is forgiven.'

A foolproof plan.

Now, I just needed to win enough 'favours' to get everyone to wear one for a whole day. Medea and Melina were the only holdouts, but they would lose this time.

Mwahahahaha.

Diana was back.

I had cleared the world's largest drinking water sources over the last few days.

The girls had a lead on distinguishing infected en masse that they were testing tomorrow.

I would soon have an entire fluffle of bunny girls.

Despite my fears, things were looking up.

So, of course, that was when Priscilla's phone started vibrating.

"What is it?" I asked her as I saw her frown in confusion.

"I am unsure," she told me. "A message from Victoria. And I am receiving hundreds of messages at once from fans?"

With finger movements that would leave you in disbelief that she was from a medieval world, Priscilla quickly navigated through her phone.

Then she froze.

"Sir Bard," my floofy dragon said, her voice trembling. It was enough to gather everyone's attention. Even Artoria looked over as she continued to eat at a steady pace.

"What's wrong?" I asked, getting genuinely concerned.

"Are we at war?"

Wut?

"Wut?" I blinked stupidly. "With who?"

Who'd be stupid enough to declare war on me?

Even ignoring my size, my wives had just killed most Endbringers, and I had healed literally everyone on the planet.

Even if a government didn't like me, their people sure as hell would.

"Um," Priscilla continued to scroll through her phone. A half dozen languages flashed across the screen as she read her messages. "With… everyone?"

In the confused silence, Medea's mouth opened wide enough to eat all the food in one

bite.

Author's Note:

Entering the endgame now. It hasn't been as evident in Volume 2 or 3, but yes, all the characters have their own perspectives. Some of you have caught on to it before, but Mikael is probably the most unreliable narrator in this entire story. A byproduct of his ego, his experience in his prison, and how he goes about things. He is the source of many problems. They just aren't the ones he thinks they are.

For those who kind of hated Diana after the last chapter, I hope this answers some questions. You don't necessarily have to like all my characters, but I hope that their internal logic remains consistent. I've always intended Diana to be a counterbalance to Mikael. So many of their views and their expectations are almost complete opposites. For example, Mikael is a pessimist who acts like an optimist. Diana is an optimist that acts like a pessimist. It isn't hero vs. monster but hero vs. human.

As should be obvious, I like to play with the dichotomy of characters. Sinister is a good example. A rational mind that is utterly blind to its irrationality. So is Waller. She is a control freak with no power who makes things worse despite her best intentions. Diana is one, too. The stalwart heroine struggles with recognizing that other people aren't literal demigods like her. Mikael has several of these contradicting traits. I won't say all of them, but one of the obvious ones is active vs passive. Or, put another way, initiative vs. reactionary.

Only a handful of chapters left, and I can admit I am feeling nervous. Almost two years of work and around 700k words, by my estimate. Can I end this story in a way that is not only narratively consistent but also satisfying?

It won't be perfect. It won't even be close to the best fanfiction I've read. I've made plenty of mistakes. There will be holes I missed. Moments that could be better written and characters deserve more attention than they got.

Still, for better or worse, it will be mine, and it will be done. I will see you all next week.

DREAM IV

"Many of our daydreams would darken into nightmares, were there a danger of their coming true!"
-Logan Pearsall Smith

The video was heavily edited. Anyone with half a brain cell could tell that.

It depicted the Elden Lord trapping heroes of the US Protectorate and other international figures like the Justice League. They had come together under the flag of peace, and the evil dragon had trapped them in a hall they could not escape.

Led by the X-men and a grieving father, the heroes denounced his kidnapping of an infant and its mother. The evil dragon mastered everyone but the mutant group and forced them to watch as he toyed with the X-men.

Systematically, the Elden Lord tore them apart, toying with them. When he tired of the farce, his actions went from taunting arrogance to malicious cruelty. The video did not shy away from the gory details.

The Elden Lord in the video did it all with a bloodthirsty smile.

After the torture was done, he waved his hands, and everyone in the hall who was not on his side disappeared into a portal.

Not one frame was artificially created. It was real, which lent it a veneer of legitimacy.

For those looking for opportunity, it was the perfect excuse.

Petty dictators, would be warlords, or political groups looking to validate their existences all joined in together to denounce the evil dragon. There was no lack of such groups in the wake of Heartbreak, with the rise of Supers and their entourages or factionalization of governments that occurred in the countries damaged by the Endbringers. Creating a common enemy would go a long way to consolidating their hold on the destabilized societies or disenfranchised populace.

They were further validated when recognized nations joined in on the bandwagon.

On top of the small nations led by singular individuals, those that could declare war on a whim, several powerful nations joined in on the concurrent announcement.

The initial statement denouncing the Elden Lord as a villain was signed by seventy-four nations ranging from NATO nations such as Canada, France, Germany, and the UK to their historic rivals such as China and Russia.

Even independent nations led by Supers, such as Genosha, Wakanda, and Biayla, joined in on that initial declaration of condemnation.

And that was just the first draft.

Within twenty-four hours, over thirty more nation-states signed the declaration of war against the Elden Lord and his Family.

Two countries were notably absent from the list of signatories.

The US almost joined, but heavy political lobbying by Senator Lex Luthor kept the decision from going through. He was able to do this due to the unexpected loss of Amanda Waller, who would have pushed heavily for it, and the faction around her scrambling to fill her vacant position.

The other notable absentee was Latvaria.

According to rumour, when Victor Von Doom was approached by other countries to join the second wave of signatories, the King of Latvaria laughed the diplomats out of his castle.

A few rocks could not break a rising tide.

Mikael and every one of his wives were designated as 'Global Villains.' A rare designation created by the UN in the years since the rise of Supers.

It designated someone or something as an existential threat to humanity, and any country seen aiding and abetting such Villains would face sanctions by other countries. There was also a bounty for capturing or killing such Global Villains. It was responsible for the destruction of many S-class threats.

With that one declaration, almost the entire Earth was at war with the Elden Lord.

Mikael was the enemy of humanity.

Only… not really.

Certainly, almost every nation of significant power was now legally at war with the Elden Lord, thanks to his status as a Global Villain. Entire fleets had been sent to surround his home Island. There were demands that he leave the Earth and bring back the heroes he had kidnapped.

Some more opportunistic nations also demanded compensation in the form of power, immortality, wealth, or anything they thought they could get away with.

But… that was it.

Despite all the rhetoric, all the threats and all the bluster, the nations of Earth and their representatives could do nothing to actually threaten the Elden Lord.

Blockade trade? He traded with no one.

Quarantine him? He could teleport anywhere on the planet, using illusions to look like anyone.

Attack him? He would crush your country with one hand. Literally.

Those were the logistical reasons humanity found itself helpless before this evil

dragon.

It wasn't the main reason.

It was a problem as obvious as it was crippling to any sort of effort to wage war on the Elden Lord.

Humanity was not united on the fact that Mikael *was* a villain.

The video of his 'kidnapping and torturing heroes' did convince many of his malicious nature, but it was only a fraction of the populace.

Many of humanity either didn't believe the video to be real, thought it to be legitimate, but Mikael had a reason for his actions or believed it to be a hundred percent accurate, but that war against the dragon the size of a subcontinent was suicide. Better sacrifice a few heroes if it meant Earth lived another day.

Another huge factor was Heartbreak.

While those who took to Emma's Semblance badly were ready to jump on the hate train, most people's experience with it was a quasi-religious experience. The exact nature varied from person to person, but Heartbreak was the closest many had come to experiencing perfect peace, love, and happiness.

On top of experiencing the closest thing to paradise, thanks to Mikael's emotions, or so people believed, there was no denying his wives had been pivotal in the destruction of the Endbringers and the rebuilding in their wake.

There were other, less global, reasons.

Artoria and Diana were very active as heroes, and it wasn't rare for another member of the Family to occasionally join them to deal with incidents that cropped up.

Priscilla had a die-hard following, both for her music and her streaming, and from those who focused on the 'love story' Mikael had told during his interview with the Daily Planet.

At this point, Scathach was almost a meme with how she would wander around the world looking for challenges that often led to the defeat of powerful villains. It was almost comical how all she had to do was show up, and people would throw themselves at her feet in surrender. (She was very put out when that happened.)

Melina healed the entire eastern seaboard. Medea was building a whole city to replace Beijing. Tsunade created houses that grew their own food for the displaced.

Glynda Goodwitch was THE person you wanted to show up after a Super battle. There were online petitions, signed by hundreds of thousands of people, to get her to visit their city for only an hour.

Raven ate satan.

Even if people thought the Elden Lord was a villain, very few believed his wives to be

anything but heroic. Combined with how Mikael very obviously doted on them and the experience of Heartbreak, many who didn't trust him trusted his Family to reign him in.

Mikael wasn't without heroic actions either.

It was his sword that killed Doomsday. He had stared down the closest thing this world had to the devil for a team of beloved heroes and the city they defended. He brought back the dead, a beloved heroine, and 'reformed' a former villain, giving the world back one of its greatest heroes.

He had healed everyone on Earth in the wake of Heartbreak.

Many would have died without that healing, and countless more would have lost loved ones.

His personal charisma wasn't to be underestimated either.

For one, he acted remarkably human. Made jokes, wasn't too proud to laugh at his own expense, and was a loving husband. There were countless short gifs on the internet of his face going through comical expressions.

Whether it was about his 'harem,' sense of humour, power, or some absurd thing he did that broke logic, Mikael was the single most memeable figure on Earth. Captions ranged from 'I wanted to join satan, but he didn't offer dental,' or 'I'm so sexy I have women crawling from their graves for a piece.'

The 'Elden Lord' was a popular and affordable Halloween costume consisting of a floral print shirt and shorts. Dragon wings were optional.

Supers, whether heroes or villains, tended to be larger-than-life characters. It felt less like they were part of society and more like they were on the outside, on the fringes.

People liked them, feared them, admired them, and even revered them, but it was the appreciation one had an ideal, an art piece, a celebrity, or a tank. There was a distance between humanity and… them.

Not all heroes, of course. People like the Flash, Thor, Beast Boy, and other heroes actively tried to engage with the ordinary citizens, but there was still a disconnect. They still wore flashy costumes, went on patrol, and fought crime.

They were still heroes.

Mikael wasn't.

The simple fact was that Mikael was a dork.

For all his power, reputation, and ability to bend common sense over his knee and spank it, Mikael just seemed way more human than most heroes people dealt with daily.

He wore no mask or costume, was a family man, and did not press his sense of 'justice' onto other cultures. A live and let-live type that many people wished was more common.

To say that Mikael and his Family were divisive figures in the wake of the declaration of war was an understatement.

Humanity was split.

A small section of powerful people, both politically and in the Super sense, had declared the Elden Lord an enemy of mankind.

A much larger but weaker section still saw the White Dragon as a saviour or defender.

To an outside observer, it looked like humanity had gone mad, and the Elden Lord was the cause.

To someone who had more details? It was the jaws of a trap closing in.

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"They're trying to limit our choices," Artoria said as we sat around a round table in my War Room.

It was just a large room with a round table big enough for all of us to have a seat. Snacks were spaced out intermittently, as were drinks and a magical depiction of the Island and its surroundings we could zoom in on.

It was mostly for show.

The only thing that made it a War Room was that I had painted 'War Room' bright red over the entrance.

Except for the shape of the table, it could have been considered another dining room.

Ok, I had created my War Room on a whim. Sue me.

I had to find a purpose for the empty rooms in my Mansion. Even with all my 'prisoners,' my wives' hobby rooms, or workshops, I was far from using all the available space. Any excuse to make a new room was to be taken advantage of.

For obvious reasons, my two favourite extraneous rooms were the Cuddle Room and the Room Room.

"How exactly?" Medea asked. "It is not as if these nations pose an actual threat to us."

"It is asset denial rather than threat generation," Diana pointed out. "This was probably the backup plan from the get-go. If we had reacted to the original framing, that of the kidnapping of Madelyne Pryor and Nathan Summers, with violence, then we would have alienated both heroes and the people they defended. If we didn't, we'd still have to confront them somehow. And, during a peaceful negotiation, the heroes disappear. I believe the only thing that surprised our enemy was that we also used the negotiation as bait and actually succeeded at taking back the victims, discovering what Sinister was up to."

“By declaring war on us, our enemy has forced us to make three choices,” Artoria nodded at Diana in agreement. “The first is the most obvious. Do we stay or do we go? If we leave Earth, as many call for, our enemy has uncontested access. If we believe Ciara and Valeria, that means they win as nobody is left to fight them they cannot control.”

“We’re staying,” I answered immediately, getting nods from the women around me.

There were a few reasons staying was the best course.

First, without me trying to reign it in, the Blood Plague would spread over Earth and the entire universe, essentially dooming it without my intervention.

Usually, I wouldn’t care about one universe dying, but I was attached to this one, and it turning into a Lovecraftian hellscape because of my carelessness did not sit right with me.

The second reason was that none of my wives would be happy dragging them from this universe when they wanted to help. While some wouldn’t necessarily care, most did. Hell, none of them really cared about the whole world being their enemies. It wasn’t even the first time for most of them. None of my wives were the type to back down from a challenge.

The third reason was pretty simple. I had yet to see anything we couldn’t beat with enough time and effort. Yes, the Endbringers, gods, and heroes were annoying, but that was all they were. They were a threat to me if they took us by surprise, which they had, but now that we knew someone was actively against us, I would be better prepared.

The final and most significant reason was that I was the pettiest man who ever pettied a petticoat in Petty Junction.

Someone had fucked with me on multiple occasions, and I was not going to leave until I had fucked them up at least three times as much.

The first of the three choices was obvious for all those reasons and more.

We were staying.

“I agree,” Artoria said, giving me a small smile before putting her game face back on. Medea clutched her heart and pretended to faint from the cuteness. “Since we are staying, we need to face the second choice. Do we react publicly or not? There is a possibility that, given enough time, the kidnapped heroes will free themselves or be rescued. Once they do, we will have information on our foe we do not have now. If we remain silent on the global stage in the face of the declaration, we may operate behind the scenes as we did when we arrived. Freeing world leaders from control or searching for the heroes can be accomplished behind the scenes.”

Despite being the one to propose it, Artoria did not look like she agreed with this plan. She was the type who preferred to confront things head-on rather than skulk about.

She recognized the need for subtlety when necessary. She just didn't like it.

"That won't work," I shook my head. "While I can continue to Free people, and I will, they are only truly Free while I touch them. I must have Freed every one of the kidnapped heroes at least a dozen times, Strange included. I do it by habit now whenever I touch someone. Yet Strange still turned into a pod person. Which means it can be reset quickly. I think Doom and Valeria missed something. It's not about the emotional trigger; Valeria is still Free after all this time. I think it is less a 'feel despair and become slaves' and more, 'feel despair and I can make you slaves whenever I want.'"

"So it is a parameter," Medea asked, leaning forward in interest. "Like a bounded field that detects hostile intent but does not activate until directed."

"Perhaps it is better to liken it to one of mine dolls," Ranni said. "Should I lose one because I hath moved between the Island or Earth, I cease to be connected to the dolls I left behind. But, should I wish it, I can always establish mine connection again as I wish."

"However we think of it, we need to acknowledge that we cannot trust anyone who I am not actively Freeing to not fall under this oppressor's sway again as soon as I leave," I tried to get back on topic. "And, quite frankly, this 'war' is less important than the Blood Plague. Any effort I dedicate to Freeing leaders, Supers, or searching for our super-napped friends is time I am not clearing water sources or clearing out the plague. That will remain my priority until I feel comfortable Earth will not become a second Yharnam."

"We can focus on the heroic rescue of heroes while you do that," Yoruichi waived me off. "But we need to answer Artoria's second question. Do we react publicly or not?"

"Remaining in the shadows and not showing our movement has the benefit of keeping our movements hidden," Robin put forward. "Our enemy has been a step ahead of us this entire time. They have been spying on us through the eyes of everyone and can formulate how to respond with information we lack. I am beginning to quite dislike the nature of 'Super genius' of this world."

"While they are smart, probably smarter than us, that isn't the end of it," I shrugged, less bothered than Robin was, even if I would have my dramatic revenge for being led around. "We've had our victories. And remember, they only need to fuck up once for us to descend on them like Medea on a meal. Super geniuses always have super egos. They'll fuck up eventually."

"We need to do something publicly," Emma said firmly, getting us back on track. "Right now, the initial 'declaration of war' is little more than grandstanding. Political theatre. Yes, it targets us so we cannot call on allies we might have otherwise, but it is also a valid attack on our image. Should we allow them to do as they wish, they shall shape whatever narrative they wish and what support we enjoy because of our actions so far will

fade slowly with every day we do not respond."

"We cannot just attack these countries," Tsunade said, rubbing her brow.

"Why not," Scathach said, but her smirk told everyone she was joking. "We'd win."

"Irrelevant," Tsunade rolled her eyes, sipping her sake. "Should we destroy, conquer, or attack even one, it shall validate everything they accuse us of. The others would double down, and we'd have to do the same to all of them."

"I understand we'd be making martyrs out of them," Scathach nodded, but her smirk faded, and her eyes narrowed as she looked around the room. "But I believe everyone is missing a key question. Why not just use force? We are strong enough and have enough options that we will be able to dispose of those who oppose us without harming civilians. Should we wish, we could conquer this planet in an afternoon. Should we take all their pawns, our foe would have no choice but to face us themselves or give up their ambitions."

"That would involve fighting and killing almost every Super on this planet," Diana shook her head. "As well as many world leaders. Even if we can, we shouldn't."

"Even if we ignore moral reasoning, there is also the logistical aspect to consider," Emma pointed out. "Should we actually conquer Earth and kill our enemy, what then? What happens when we leave? Time in this dimension does not freeze when we are gone. We would need to remain here to rule or reconquer every time we returned."

The White Queen got a few surprised looks from the other women.

It was no secret that Emma wanted me to become an authority figure, to have some grandiose plan for universal conquest, or that she thought I was wasting my potential. To hear her argue against world conquest would be unexpected by the others.

It wasn't for me. Everyone else fundamentally misunderstood Emma's priorities.

Me.

I was the fundamental existence Emma had built her entire worldview around. If saving this world required me to stay to rule Earth, essentially trapping me in this reality when I wanted to travel to others, Emma would rather burn the world than let that happen.

She wanted me to become an authority figure, to have some grandiose plan for universal conquest, or to realize my full potential only because she believed it would benefit me. If it didn't, then she would argue against it.

That was how much her experience inside my mind had changed her.

"Doing so would also be counter to our goal of getting humanity to work with us, not against us," Emma continued, not minding the surprised stares.

"Why is that our goal," Scathach challenged. "Why is it necessary? Humanity cannot

aid us and cannot be a reliable ally when they can fall to our enemy's sway. Time and again, they have proven this. Why are we expending so much effort to appeal to the masses?"

"Because it is the right thing to do," Glynda pushed. "It is only when it is united that humanity can stand strong. Divided, it will die."

I gave Scathach a long look. I didn't think she was actually arguing that we should leave everyone to die. For all that she enjoyed a good fight, Scathach had been a queen. She was a hero in the classical sense rather than the Super sense, but she was still a figure who fought and killed for her people.

Was she just playing the devil's advocate? Pointing out facts we hadn't considered?

Or was this a test of our commitment? We were not taking the easy choice, and she wanted us to be aware before continuing.

Still, beyond morals, I had very valid reasons for wanting humanity on my side.

"There might be billions infected with the Old Blood," I pointed out. "Even if I spent years clearing out every water source, I would not be able to free everyone by myself. I need coordination and cooperation to get the largest portion of the population Blood-free. Once people start to go Beast, it will cause a cascade effect and blood will spill, infecting more people. Before that happens, we need to get the number of infected down to a manageable level. Because if not, Earth will become one huge Yharnam, and I will need to destroy it down to the atoms to ensure it doesn't doom every other lifeform in this universe."

My words brought the mood down, but they needed to be said. Just because the enemy had made a move didn't mean I had forgotten my priorities.

I was all for letting countless universes die out if that was their natural conclusion. The multiverse was infinite, and I couldn't save everyone. But there was no way I would let my own fuck-up be the cause.

My goal was not to ensure a happy ever after for this world. It was to purge the Old Blood and give whoever messed with me a kick in the nads. And the most effective way to do both was to get as many people on my side as possible.

A side benefit was that it meant all my effort until now to ingratiate myself in this world would not go to waste.

"So long as we know what we are doing," Scathach nodded grimly. "And we know that retreat and attack are as valid options as any other."

"Options with costs," Artoria rejoined seriously before looking around the table. "So, for the second choice, we shall act publicly?" There were nods around the table, and Artoria let out the tiniest of smiles. "Very well, now we come to our last and greatest

choice. How shall we act?"

There was a moment of contemplative silence.

"Our greatest threat is the Old Blood," I repeated. "This declaration of war is inconsequential compared to that. And as of right now, I am the only one who can 'cure' it without killing the infected. And they need to want to be cured. Have any of you had luck finding a method of removing it?"

"It is as you warned," Medea sighed. "As soon as it merges with the host's blood, it replaces their entire circulatory system."

"Not just that," Tsunade chimed in. "It goes down to the bone marrow. They become blood producers. Any medical treatment would involve removing every drop of blood and every bone at the same time. I can do it with Amelia's aid, but we would need you to keep them alive while we do so."

"Which would take more time, not less," I grimaced. "At that point, it's better just to Free them."

"I discovered that I can tear blood from people from any open wound," Scathach smirked. "It is a useful trick I am eager to test at our next opportunity. But that would be no different than simply killing the infected."

"But nothing better than me just going around poking people or getting them to come to poke me," I shook my head.

"As of the moment, that is the most reliable method of dealing with the Old Blood non-lethally. Tsunade's operation does have a benefit, though. It is an option for those who do not want to be Free," Medea pointed out. "We can use it to save the newborn after we are done here. But none of us have conceptual abilities as ubiquitous as your ability to 'Free' things. Diana might be able to Free people from the negative influence of beasthood, but her expression of her Element is more directed toward the concept of 'Human Liberty' rather than purely 'Freedom' even if you both have the same Element."

"Let's save the kid at least," I agreed. "We'll watch him for a few days, just to make sure this operation works, then we'll drop off baby Cable with his mom at Xavier's. That will go a long way towards building some of our lost goodwill with that faction."

"There is some good news," Melina joined in. "We have devised a method to distinguish infected from not globally. It will also allow us to coordinate large volumes of people at once."

"Really?" I couldn't help but perk up. "How?"

The scale of Sinister's infection had been my most significant impediment so far. If it was just another town the size of Yharnam, with our current capabilities, we could have it cleared of Old Blood in a few days. The sheer volume of people I would need to Free and

the certainty I would miss vast portions of the population had kept me focused on clearing water sources rather than people for the moment.

If I had a way to tell infected from not and get them coordinated, I could teleport tens of thousands at once to my real body and Free them there before sending them back.

While I would still miss people, it would be a faction of a fraction of a percent of the population that I would need to Hunt compared to before.

“I shall connect to Scathach,” Melina put forward. “She will be infected with the Old Blood. When she has it in her body, she can sense others with it, as they all stem from the same source, though her range is limited. Together, with the power of the Phoenix Force, we can cover the entire planet. I shall need Emma’s help controlling the information, but we can at least differentiate those infected.”

I hummed in thought. I wasn’t worried about Scathach infecting herself. Even if she let the blood in, she still had her Transformation Defence and Mind Defence. And Melina using the Phoenix Force this way would free me from having to reapply Command Seals to Emma to give her the power to do so herself.

Seals that only last a fraction of the time we’d need to keep this up can be used as strategic resources, just as intended in Fate. Ironically, their ability to give commands was their least useful aspect.

It would also give Melina more practice, eventually not needing Emma at all to regulate all that information. I hadn’t given up hope of having one of the greatest reality manipulators of the Marvel universe on my side once we could trust Melina’s control of the Phoenix Force to not accidentally turn Earth into a match when she stubbs her toe.

“How does it help coordinate people,” I asked. “Will you be speaking to their minds? That will put people off pretty quickly, and we want to incentivize their cooperation.”

“Nay,” Ranni spoke instead of my maiden. “I shall be the one to handle corralling the masses.”

“With your dolls? That could work,” I nodded. “Can you make enough of them? We’re talking tens of thousands of people at once if we want to clear the Old Blood in any reliable time frame.”

Ranni stared at me, her face weirdly blank except her narrowed eyes. Usually, she was incredibly expressive despite her best attempts to maintain neutrality. I knew she could go all doll-face if she wanted, but she was so unused to having an actual body that she forgot most of the time.

To see her like this meant Ranni was focused and serious about the subject.

“My Lord Husband.” Ranni’s tone was one I had not heard in a while. It was chastising, almost reproving. “Why hath thee not called upon the aid of mine Order?”

“You’re going to need to give me more than that, Doll,” I drawled with a smile. “I do ask for your help. Pretty regularly. From all of you.”

“And yet thou hast never used, nor asked to use, mine Order,” Ranni rejoined. “Whilst I may not yet possess Queen Marika’s expertise, I am not so lacking to be unable to establish mine own dominion upon this world.”

It took me much longer than I thought should have been the case to realize what Ranni was talking about.

“You are talking about using the Elden Ring to change this world into part of your Order?” I asked, just to be sure.

“Correct.”

“Wait,” Medea interrupted before I could explain myself. The Greek witch was leaning forward and staring at my blue wife with an intense expression. “Are you saying you make worlds other than yours your own? You can exert capital-A Authority? Full godhood?”

Both Artoria and Scathach leaned forward as well. They also gave me very respectful looks as if re-evaluating my time in Elden Ring.

They shouldn’t. By the time I arrived, whatever Authority the Elden Beast had was shattered with the Elden Ring by Marika.

“Have I not said I am the Goddess of the Chill Moon? Did thee think this an empty boast?” Ranni asked, actually frowning.

“No,” Medea shook her head. “But ‘god’ is a catch-all term. Their exact nature varies from world to world, as do their powers. Even in my home world, there were different forms of gods. The Greek pantheon were originally great spaceships that arrived on Earth and took human form after a disaster destroyed their original bodies. The Mesoamerican gods were alien bacteria that travelled from host to host. Very few of the gods actually originated on Earth. What we categorized as ‘gods’ were beings that exerted ‘Authority,’ that is, the ability to reshape reality to their wills, limited to their scope, without the actual use of power.”

“For those of us unfamiliar with magic,” Robin raised her hand in question. “Why is ‘Authority’ important?”

Several other women at the table nodded in agreement, also confused.

Medea looked like she would lecture them, but I cleared my throat.

“Just the cliff notes,” I suggested. “You can go into the exact details of ‘Divinity Vs. Authority Vs. Magecraft Vs. True Magic’ later.”

“All right,” Medea paused, giving the subject some thought. “First of all, the gods that Mikael fought would have been classified as ‘Divine Spirits’ in my world, not full gods, because they did not have actual Authority.”

“What does that word actually mean,” Glynda asked, looking genuinely interested in the subject.

“It is a literal translation,” Medea emphasized. “It is the Authority to command the world. It is the right, the qualifications to do as one wills. For example, a Divine Spirit of War can use its power to influence people to start a war. A War God would just need to think of one, and the world would make one for it, reshaping reality itself so that War happened.”

It was part of the reason one needed two Great Runes to enter Leyndell in the first place. Without them, someone just didn’t have the right to stand before the Elden Beast and become Elden Lord.

“It’s like someone having the ability to edit a story as it’s written,” I dumbed it down even more for those still looking confused. “Or, in modern terms, the ability to modify the code of reality directly, rather than needing to run a separate program.”

This was why Scathach was such a big deal in her world, or any world, really.

With no divine heritage of her own, or Authority backing her, she still managed to kill a god. It was like an NPC jumping from a computer and killing the programmer. It was absurd, going completely against the rules of nature, yet it still happened.

“Right,” Medea nodded. “In a way, it is a direct connection to the Root, the source of all things. You can’t fight that, not really. If something with Authority wants you dead, you die. Not only that, they can remove you from having ever existed in the first place. The only way to oppose something with Authority is to either have Authority yourself or something on your side with it. It is why all the stories from my culture have gods choosing sides. It wasn’t that there were no conflicts where only one side had divine protection. It is just that if one side didn’t have Authority backing them, you either never heard about them or they were a cautionary tale. Arachne, for example.”

“That sounds like an absolute catastrophe,” Tsunade frowned.

“It was,” Medea said, and hatred dripped from her voice. “If a love goddess wanted you to fall in love, you did. There was nothing you could do. Even if your grandfather is a god. Even if you had never even seen the man before, you loved him absolutely.”

“Gods are dicks,” I summarized, dragging attention to me to give Medea a moment. “But within their Authority, their will is absolute. They can have multiple Authorities or those that overlap with other gods. Zeus, for example, was a god of Theatre and Drama, but so were the Muses. They can fight, one can suborn themselves to the other gods, or join hands. The only consolation is that they were closer to the forces of nature than actual people. Like machines with programming, they used Authority, but their Authority used them too. They became embodiments of it, never able to deviate from who they were.”

After the little sermon, I looked at Ranni to get us back to the original question.

“Honestly, I didn’t know you had that much power and control with your Order.”

“It is not the same,” Ranni allowed. “As Lady Medea said, the rules vary from world to world. But I can exhibit much greater efficacy with mine Order than I can without it. Should I bring this world under my sway, our options shall expand considerably. Therefore, thy lack of acknowledgement or use of it has been most vexing.”

“I thought the entire point of you taking the Elden Ring and leaving the Lands Between was because you did not want to use it,” I frowned. “You saw how it, the use of it and the pursuit of it, warped society. Apart from not knowing what you can actually do with it, I just thought you wouldn’t want to use it. To quote the Ever Brilliant Goldmask, people are flawed. I thought you didn’t want to give them the temptation.”

“Whilst I appreciate my Lord’s consideration,” Ranni smiled softly, now knowing it wasn’t because I had intentionally sidelined her. “I am not opposed to using mine power, of which mine Order is a facet. Thou are not wrong about mine intentions with the Lands Between. However, mine Order is not the pinnacle of existence here. Withing our Family alone, two others hold as much sway over reality as I can.”

Raven, who had remained completely silent and blank-faced as usual, held her hand in a peace sign.

Melina rolled her eyes as the Phoenix Force flared around her as if in agreement with Ranni’s words.

“Nor is it at risk of falling into any hands but ours,” Ranni continued. “Neither shall we remain on this world for the millennia it would take to truly bend this reality to its sway. So long as thy do not wish for me to make such a drastic change as to remove Destined Death from the people of this world, exerting a limited Authority is not only within my abilities but should be used, rather than wasted.”

“No,” I shook my head with a chuckle. “We will not be taking away people’s ability to die. If your Order can help deal with Old Blood, that would be more than enough. Any way you can wave your hand and make it go away?”

“Nay,” Ranni shook her head. “In a century or so, perhaps. I can, however, lead those afflicted as we need them and communicate to this entire world. Or allow thee to do such without issue.”

It took me a moment to realize what Ranni was talking about. When I did, my grin grew three sizes that day.

(I was getting better and better and manipulating my human form. Studying Mystique was a great opportunity.)

“Alright,” I clapped. “I have the plan. Now I need your help writing the speech. We’re

going super dramatic with this one."

For some reason, my wives started giving me a long-suffering look.

******

It was always there.

Right there.

At the edge of your notice, at the side of your vision.

Day or night. Rain or sunshine.

For months, it was omnipresent. A constant of life humanity had gotten used to.

The Chill Moon.

A massive planetary satellite of pale blue light in-laid with rings of golden light weaved in intricate patterns.

When it first arrived with the Elden Lord, there had been fear over what it meant and how it would affect life on Earth.

Would it block the sunlight, cooling the Earth to dangerous temperatures?

Would it alter the tides like the regular moon did?

There were dozens of theories and hundreds of fears.

None of them came true.

Astrologers could peer beyond it as if it didn't exist.

Satellites did not find their view blocked in any way.

Animals demonstrated no greater or lesser effect from light pollution despite its resplendence.

The burgeoning space industry, long floundering in fear of the Simurgh, had no issues going beyond its pale blue glow.

Even sleep cycles did not find any greater issue with the excess light.

Like a thin film over the Earth, the Chill Moon hung not as an obstruction but as a decoration.

A decoration people got used to very quickly.

It wasn't hurting anyone after all.

It didn't matter where you were on the planet, the time of day, or the weather.

The Chill Moon was just… there.

It became as the air they breathed, the earth they walked, or the water they drank.

A facet of reality so ubiquitous that some children did not even remember a time when the blue moon did not dominate the sky despite it having been present only a few months.

That ubiquity was why it took many so long to realize the Chill Moon had changed.

It remained the same size and omnipresent, but its glow magnified until the entire world was dyed in hues of blue.

Some noticed right away. Others took longer, minutes even, to see the change.

Everyone heard the Elden Lord's voice simultaneously, whether they noticed the source or not.

"To every living being and every living soul."

Inside. Outside. Awake. Asleep. Old. Young.

Everyone with a sapient mind heard it.

Those looking at the Chill Moon would see its blue, black and gold image shift. As if they were looking at a scene through a window with a round blue frame and gold muntin.

Everyone who looked at the Chill Moon saw a Family.

Ten women sat in a line in the background, watching quietly.

In the center of the three chairs in the foreground, the Elden Lord overlooked the entire world with draconic eyes.

"I am… disappointed."

Every face on the moon was blank. Severe. Judging.

Traffic ground to a halt. People stopped during their commute. Looked out of windows. Woke from their beds and left their homes to face the sky.

"My Family are visitors to Earth. While here, we have done our best to aid you. Earth holds a special place in our hearts. And in return? After we have fought and bled for you? When our aid is most needed and offered freely? You point your weapons at us and decry us as villains."

The Elden Lord was not smiling.

He was not laughing or joking. This was not the man most were familiar with through clips, interviews, or memes.

Mikael was channelling his Conquerer Haki and flexing his Performance Talent, Siren Song, and every other skill he had to the best of his ability.

To Mikael, he was using dramatics to instill seriousness into the population and warn them of danger.

To the people of of Earth?

It was like being judged by an angry god.

And they had been found wanting.

"I will declare this now. You cannot hurt us. You cannot beat us. You cannot kill us. Throw your armies against our home, your heroes and soldiers against us, and we shall emerge victorious. Were we the villains you accuse us of being, we would kill and

conquer, and there is nothing you could do to stop us."

For that long moment after the Elden Lord's proclamation, many felt fear seize their hearts.

Not so long ago, the White Dragon almost destroyed the planet in its path.

It was not so long ago that this Family killed Endbringers that Earth's mightiest defenders flailed helplessly against.

It was not so long ago that this being performed miracles.

Then, in contrast to the serious tone of the threat, the Elden Lord smiled.

It was a gentle smile of warmth and humour that reached all the way to his draconic eyes.

"We are not those villains. We do not want to kill and conquer. To prove this, we shall speak with our actions. I invite anyone and everyone to throw themselves against us. We shall act exactly as we have till now. We shall not hurt you. So long as you are only carrying out orders and doing what your oaths to home compel, we shall not kill you. I can't promise I won't embarrass you, but a few pranks are the least you deserve for attacking people trying to help, don't you think?"

The entire world breathed a sigh of relief at the familiar smile and jovial attitude.

Whether somebody believed the story about Mikael and his Family being villains, very few were hopeful of their chances of fighting them off.

The sailors on the fleets sailing to the Island knew how easily they could be sunk. Pilots knew they had no chance against dragons in the sky. Heroes and villains alike did not wish to fight the Elden Lord, no matter what their leaders ordered.

The Family were out of context problems humanity wasn't ready to deal with yet.

It was a war nobody wanted to fight, for there would be no winners, only losers.

"As for the accusations against me and my Family, I will speak plainly. You are being deceived. Lied to. The video 'proof' is naught but a fabrication to frame us. A justification to alienate my Family from the planet we love and the people on it. To prove this, the original, unedited version of events that took place within King Arthur's Hall shall be released to the public, as well as a copy of these words. I invite every level of scrutiny, every question or evaluation of the veracity of my words. I ask not for belief but for inquisition. Truth dies not in darkness, but in willful ignorance."

Ever since that night in Panacea Park, Mikael had taken special care to always keep some form of recording device on himself. Most of the time, it was just his phone, as with the meeting with the gods. When he knew he had important meetings, he did wear hidden cameras. Combined with Batman's recordings of the event, they had the complete footage of the meeting in Enhangwen.

Now, Mikael's preparation (read: paranoia) paid off.

He wasn't the only one feeling vindicated.

All around the world, people let out cheers. Even without seeing this 'proof,' they felt its very existence validated their belief in Mikael or one of his wives.

Humanity loved its heroes, even when they were not actually heroes.

"Were this the only issue, I would not be speaking to you all and disturbing your life. My Family and I would just leave. We do not wish to be enemies of anyone. There are worlds out there that do not fear us. But we cannot. Earth is in grave danger. You are in danger. And the heroes who would defend you have been taken."

From the jovial tone, Mikael had once more shifted to a more serious note, his face looking graver than ever before.

All cheers and jubilations died as the world braced for why the Elden Lord had seen fit to appear upon the face of the Chill Moon.

"A villain named Mister Sinister has released a plague upon the world. He and his allies are fermenting dissent between my Family and your leaders. While I have already dealt with the foe, he managed to spread his disease before I learned of it. He put it in the water you drink. As of right now, over half of all humanity has been infected by this plague. It will not be tomorrow. It will not be in a week. But eventually, the plague will claim all infected."

Fear.

"It is a blood-based infection. If left untreated, those infected will go mad and attack those around them in a beastlike frenzy."

Panic.

"Medicine cannot help you. Heroes cannot help you. I have talked to Panacea, one of your world's greatest healers, and even she cannot help you."

Terror.

"But I can."

Mikael stood from his seat. The two women beside him did the same.

A Demon Lord and a Goddess joined their husband in offering salvation to a world that needed it.

"We can help you."

Mikael extended his hand as if asking everyone watching to take it.

Millions of people found their hands rising unconsciously.

Not from any control. They just wanted to take the hand.

"Just as I have Freed the seas of their pollution, so too can I Free you of this plague. I have already cleaned the water and can do the same for you. But to do that, I must touch

you. I cannot heal such an affliction as I do regular disease or injury."

Many wept.

They could not reach the man in the sky.

They could not reach the dragon in the sea.

It was too far.

"I know you. You watching this. I know your fear. I know your struggle. I know you only seek to live your life in a world so hostile and so cruel."

He did know.

Mikael knew more than anyone else what it was like to be helpless and caught up in the wake of higher powers.

Maybe that was why, despite his insistence on not being a hero, Mikael was adamant in the removal of the Old Blood.

Universes would come and go. Quadrillions would live and die.

But, if he could help it, it would never be because of his negligence.

He would never forget that he, too, was once the little guy at a negotiating table with beings so far beyond him.

"I will not ask for the impossible. I will not ask you to leave your homes to come to me. I shall not ask you to overthrow your leaders. I do not wish you to fight anyone. Every drop of blood spilled is one more infection. All I ask is that you follow the Grace of the Moon."

Mikael gestured to Ranni on his right. She glowed with blue light.

All around the world, eyes were filled with flickering starlight of a pale blue hue.

The same starlight streamed in ribbons from the Chill Moon. Everyone saw that.

Those upon whom Grace was bestowed saw those same ribbons of blue light dance through the air as if they were the wind.

"The Grace shall offer Guidance, leading you to a gentle shadow."

Mikael gestured to Raven on his left. Darkness billowed from her in waves.

The streams of starlight flowed into it without issues.

"The shadow will take you to me and bring you back. A minute. That is all it will take to Free you of this plague. Working together, we can cure this blight one city at a time."

Mikael extended his hands towards the people of Earth one last time.

Every one of those beings watching gained one tick of Insight as Mikael subtly let them peer past the veil. To see the Truth.

And tiny insurance against beasthood to delay the outbreak just a little longer.

To Mikael, it was a hammed-up public service announcement using every trick in his book.

“I cannot do this alone. All I can offer is Life. It is up to you to take it.”

To Earth and its people, it was salvation.

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I let out a breath as Ranni released her control on the symbol of her Order.

“I cannot believe you made me do that,” Raven glared up at me. Her face was beet red. “That was terrible.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” I waved off her concern.

“T’was…” Priscilla hesitated as if to spare my feelings. “A bit much.”

“So overdramatic,” Yoruichi laughed, leaning on Robin, who was also giggling uncontrollably. “The arms, haha, the faces, haha, oh god, I can’t stop.”

I looked around the room. Many of my wives were shuffling uncomfortably, even those used to press conferences and speeches. Glynda rubbed her temples tiredly while Artoria was as red-faced as I’d ever seen her.

“Lucky bitch,” Tsunade grumbled as Emma handed me a drink.

Due to still remaining a secret from the world at large, she did not need to be with us to emphasize our united front. I had tried to semi-recreate the scene after the battle with Doomsday to call back the ‘misunderstanding’ aspect that had led to the initial tensions.

I used every trick in my book to ensure things went how I wanted. Dozens of tactics for manipulation, enhanced in every aspect, all bent on making sure as many people wanted to be Free of the Old Blood as possible.

“If you ever ask me to do that again, I am going to actually die.”

“Now, who’s being overdramatic,” I faked a sniff of disdain at Raven’s sass. “You all need to learn to be the character. Embrace the ham. Become one with the cringe. Shame? What is that? Can I sleep with it?”

There should be awards for this kind of thing.

As a reward for saving the world, I should demand a complete set of Oscars, Emmys, Grammys, and Tonys… What the hell, I should go for the whole REGOT combo and demand a Razzie. No way, I didn’t deserve it. That was hammy as hell.

I went going full comic-tard here.

I had to speak the local language, after all.

Melina smacked me gently on the back of my head to get me to be serious.

“Do you believe this will work,” She asked.

“For most people,” I sighed, taking another sip of my drink. “I scared them enough, and they have to do so little; I think we will get at least ninety percent of the infected if

not ninety-nine. If we hunt anyone who goes Beast as soon as we hear about it, it should be enough for a herd immunity-esque effect. But it will not get everyone."

"Then what is the plan," Diana asked.

"Buy time," I answered plainly. "Until we can remove every drop of the Old Blood in one fell swoop, that is all we can do. Right now, we are buying time to devise a way to do that with what we have access to now or enough time until Melina can master the Phoenix Force well enough for reality manipulation at that scale. I know she can do it. We just need to give her the time to get there. Once she does, it doesn't matter what our enemy does, plague or not. We win."

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In the end, my plan worked.

Millions of people followed the Grace of the Moon to Raven's shadows, where she teleported them to touch my body and then back to where they came from.

It was a resounding success.

While a few nations continued to insist on their little 'war,' and hundreds of leaders continued to decry me, they went ignored by the vast majority of people of Earth.

I had turned my enemy's attempt to alienate me from the people of this world into a call for unification.

I bought this world time.

It wasn't a lot, only three weeks or so.

It was not enough for Melina to gain control of the Phoenix Force.

Looking back, I like to think of those three weeks as an extension of the 'fourth miracle' people talk about.

Time.

Such a precious thing.

When I was mortal, my thanatophobia constantly reminded me of the slow march of time towards my inevitable death. A huge part of why I had accepted the Deal.

In the Cell, in the Kiln, every second of time was a wound.

I had too much time and not enough. My time weighed on me.

I was so very tired.

Still, I am glad I bought that time.

The Earth needed it.

I needed it.

And I could appreciate the irony.

Life is about that sometimes.

Finding the silver linings, even when things are at their worst. They're there. You just need to look.

Even if it is just enough to laugh at the irony of dates and timing.

Three weeks. Just enough time to ring in the new year.

2019.

The Last Year.

It only lasted six days.

Author's Note:

I won't say much here. Just that the subsequent three releases will be Side Stories, two of which will be on the lewder side for Valentine's Day. Then, we are straight to the end.

Less than ten chapters left.

I will see you all next week.

SIDE STORY VII: BUYING TIME

"Time is the most valuable thing a man can spend."
-Theophrastus

"We need to do it," Carl told his partner.

"No, we don't," Ashley hissed quietly. "We very much don't. We can leave. Right now. Pretend we didn't see anything."

"We can't," Carl insisted. "Our bodycam footage caught him and the screams. When it's reviewed, everyone will know we were here and left without trying to stop him."

"So what," Ashley glared back. "Nobody will blame us. Even the chief won't blame us."

"A reputation for cowardice can last a lifetime in the force."

"Not committing suicide is not cowardice."

"We'll live," Carl rolled his eyes.

"I won't," Ashley insisted. "I really will die. You know what happens. Do you want to put my mom through that? My sister? And there's this guy I've been trying to hook up with. Do you think I'll be able to face him? If I make it back at all?"

Carl genuinely didn't have an answer to that. He didn't have anyone like that in his life.

He'd been married to the job for so long, felt no desire for family or a romantic partner, and all his friends would do was raise a glass in his name.

Ashley was young and pretty, had only a few years on the police force, and had her whole life ahead of her. She had much more to lose than Carl.

Yet his answer didn't change.

"We need to," Carl repeated.

"Why?" Ashely threw her hands in the air. "Why us? We're beat cops. We're not Supers. This is too big for us. If this goes wrong, we won't even be a statistic. This isn't our fight."

How could Carl make her understand? They had already spent too much time arguing and risked losing the trail.

"You weren't infected, were you?"

He knew the answer despite asking the question. Her eyes had never been flicked with pale blue starlight, unlike his.

"No," Ashley shook her head. "But I was there when they came through the city the

first time. I saw what that woman, Raven, could do. We can't deal with something like that."

"I was," Carl reminded. They both knew he had been among those who had fallen the Grace of the Moon when shadow flooded Edmonton the first time, but he hadn't said a word of the experience, unlike some others in the precinct. "I saw the Elden Lord. Touched his scales."

"…What was it like?"

"Easy. Simple. Clean." Carl rambled, unsure how to put what he had seen and felt into words. He was never the most articulate of men. "Terrifying. Majestic. Sureal. Tens of thousands of us touched him, and we barely covered one of his scales. We were flying over the ocean on a cloud of shadow; the sun had already set over there, and we just had the Blue Moon. But when I touched him… It wasn't like Heartbreak or when he healed my cancer. It was more than that. Like he said, all he promised was life. I have never felt more alive than I did in that moment. So, I promise. We'll be fine."

Ashley stared at her mentor and partner for a long second.

"This really means that much to you," she asked.

"It does," Carl answered immediately. "I am doing this whether you join me or not, but I really want my partner with me."

"Fine," the younger woman sighed. It couldn't cover how her voice shook. "But if we die, I am blaming you."

"Thanks," Carl's smile was almost lost under his bushy mustache, but his partner caught it and rolled her eyes.

Together, the two cops exited the car into the cold night. They advanced down the narrow alleys, the snow thick around their feet and breath foging the night air.

The night was bright from the distant light of the city, the nearby streetlights, and the Chill Moon above, yet the shadows of the buildings still played tricks on their vision.

The screams and growls had cut off while they had been talking, but the silence was almost more oppressive, only the crunch of the snow under their feet giving away that nothing still lived in the half-abandoned warehousing district.

A routine nightly patrol could instantly turn into a horror movie in a place like this.

Which made the man waiting for the cops all the more disconcerting.

"Hello there."

The Elden Lord couldn't look more out of place in his floral print shirt, shorts and sandals standing on the snow. The added height of nearly two feet of snow reinforced his towering frame, even leaning against a building. He was twiddling a blade dexterously between fingers and loomed over three feet taller than Ashley's respectable five foot six

and much higher than Carl's five-four.

Ashley, gun in hand but not pointing at the Dragon, answered back on instinct.

"General Kenobi."

Barely had the words left her mouth when Carl saw horror dawn on her face, realizing what she had just said to the most powerful being on the planet. Possibly the universe.

Mikael beamed, his slight smirk turning into a wide smile as he stood straight with a laugh.

"Ha," he bit out a bark of laughter, tossing the small dagger in his hand and catching it in the other. "I love it when people play along. You have no idea how hard it is to get most of my wives properly cultured. You just made my night."

"Always happy to help," Ashley squeaked out, eyes darting around the alleyway before silently settling on Carl and begging for help.

"You are Mikael?" Carl called for verification, keeping his gun at the ready. Not for the figure in front of him. A pistol, or even a tank, wouldn't help him if the Dragon wanted them dead. "Elden Lord? Global Villain?"

"Guilty as charged," Mikael's smile turned back into a smirk, his orange draconic eyes bright in the night. The blade in his hand glinted in the moonlight as he tossed it and caught it by the handle. "What can I do for you, officers?"

"You are under arrest," Carl said simply. Then, as an afterthought, he added: "Sir."

Mikael looked even more amused.

"Now I am genuinely curious," he said, approaching the pair. They flinched, but he paid them no regard. Carl noted he left no footprints in the snow. "Why are you here, officers? You know this will not end well for you."

"Told you," Ashley hissed under her breath.

"I took an oath, sir," Carl said, voice trembling. "Protect and serve. Just because the law is written by idiots doesn't mean I can stop following it or upholding it."

"You could have left," Mikael pointed out, gesturing with his small dagger in the direction of their car. "Driven off. I know you thought of it. I could hear you arguing."

That did not surprise the cops in the least.

"We received reports of a fight, some sort of wild animal," Carl responded. He was shivering. From excitement, fear, or the cold, he could not say for sure. "Just because you are here, Sir, doesn't mean we can run away."

"Conviction. Even if in only a formality. I can respect that," Mikael nodded. "Not what I'd do in your position, but I can respect it. Of course, since you are insisting on 'arresting' me, you know what this means, don't you?"

"We do."

“Please have mercy.”

Carl’s grim determination was completely contrasted by Ashley’s squeak of fear.

Mikael looked at the pair, evaluating them, before letting out a chuckle.

“Tell you what, I’m in a good mood, I like you, and it’s almost Christmas, so I can be a bit merciful.”

“Really,” Ashley asked hopefully.

“Depends on if you can do me a favour,” Mikael shrugged casually, catching his dagger a final time. “Can you two hold your stomachs?”

Worry overtook Carl at the possible implications, but he answered.

“We were one of the first responders to Devastation’s massacre. We are not squeamish, Sir.”

Ashley looked pale but resolute as she nodded. If whatever the Elden Lord needed her to do would save her from his hands, she’d do it.

“I don’t know that one,” the Dragon admitted but turned to walk deeper into the alley. “But I’ll take your word for it. Follow me.”

They did, struggling to wade through the snow. These narrow alleys were not plowed like the main streets or those closer to the city center.

It barely took them three turns before finding the scene.

Carl’s thoughts about a horror movie flooded back as he stared at the mess.

He’d some shit in his day, but this…

Ashley gagged at the smell but managed to keep her dinner.

At least they didn’t have to worry about the snow here. It was all melted or tossed everywhere. Instead, they just needed to worry about the blood.

So much blood.

“Stop there,” the Elden Lord ordered casually, walking through the gore as the two police officers stopped outside the red-soaked alley. “Touch any of this stuff, and you’ll probably be infected. I can cure you, but better not need to.”

“What…” Carl asked, looking around in horror. “What is this?”

There were bodies littering the alley. Men. Women… Children. They were torn to pieces, rent with claws and fangs. Some had clearly been eaten, while others were just tossed aside. Some bodies looked days or even weeks old, while others were clearly fresh.

A nest. That’s what this was. A bloody, gore-covered nest.

In the center of the alleyway, at the epicentre of the blood-soaked nest, some…thing was pinned to the wall by a sword. It was humanoid-ish in appearance but covered in coarse and bloody fur. Only its torso and head remained intact, all its clawed limbs separated and lying below the corpse.

It was like some sort of horrific modern art exhibit.

“This bastard,” Mikael gestured to the macabre mural. “Had a minor Stranger ability. I bet you’ve had an uptick in disappearances recently, right?”

The Elden Lord didn’t even give the cops a chance to nod before yanking the blade from the monster’s corpse, causing it to slide to the ground with a disgusting ‘Splortch.’

He flicked his blade, clearing it of blood. Then, with a move that screamed of a thousand repetitions, he attached the dagger to its hilt with a click.

“What is it?” Ashley asked in horror.

“It’s what happens when someone thinks they don’t need to be cured of the plague I was talking about,” Mikael sighed. “Whoever this was either didn’t trust my Family to cure them, thought they could handle it, or just wanted the power. The cause doesn’t matter. You can see the result. They became a plaguebeast.”

“Why,” Carl swallowed his bile. “Why are you showing us this?”

Maybe Ashley had been right. Maybe this was too big for them. Carl had trusted the Elden Lord not to hurt them, but this… this was something else.

“You got a camera on you? I have to destroy all of this or risk spreading the plague more, but when I heard you guys, I figured you could take some pictures. I might not bring them back, but you can at least give the families of the victims some closure.”

Mikael looked so at ease with the horror, so used to the bloody sight and smell, that the idea that he cared for faceless, helpless victims seemed… surreal to the two police officers.

It was with almost numb fingers that the two police officers took what pictures they could of the bodies.

It did enter Carl’s mind, the one that wanted to find fault, that this could all be a setup. That there was no plague and the Elden Lord was just manipulating things. That there was no risk of people turning into… this and committing this kind of horror.

A part of him wanted that to be true. Even if it meant his personal saviour was humanity’s enemy.

But Carl knew the truth. He had seen the blood fly from his body as he laid hands on a resplendent scale. He had felt Mikael’s power then.

The Elden Lord did not need to trick them. If he wanted the Earth, he could have taken it.

Instead, he was putting so much effort into saving Earth from a villain’s plot.

All this? The Elden Lord didn’t need to do this. He chose to. Chose to save them. Chose to care.

Chose to be human.

Once they were done, Mikael conjured a spectral dragon head that bathed the alley in a fire hot enough to melt the stone and metal. Dissipating the construct, the Elden Lord sniffed the air like a dog, checking to see if any blood remained.

“That takes care of that,” he said, stretching languidly. “Now, just to deal with you two, and I can call it a night.”

“What?” Ashley asked in shock, shaking from the fugue the terrible sights and smells had put the pair in. “You said you’d be merciful.”

“And I will be,” Mikael grinned smugly. “Unlike every other cop, soldier, or Super that tries to arrest or mess with me and my family, I will not humiliate you on television, put you in compromising positions and take pictures for the internet, or turn your clothes into outlandish costumes.”

For the briefest of moments, the officers felt a thread of hope.

They didn’t understand that Mikael was a sadist.

“But I can’t let you go scot-free,” the Dragon revelled in their despair. “What would people think when they heard? I have a reputation to maintain.”

“What if I said pretty please?”

“Hmm,” Mikael pretended to give the woman’s plea some thought. Then the facade fell, and he grinned maliciously. “No.”

With a clap of his hands and a wild laugh, the Elden Lord disappeared from the dark alley.

It took very little time for the two cops to discover what had been done to them.

Their standard-issue handcuffs had all been replaced by ones covered in pink fuzz.

Not just the ones they had on their person either, but also those they had in the car.

If that had been all, the pair could have laughed it off and requisitioned more without issue.

It wasn’t.

The fuzzy cuffs were enchanted to be tough enough to stand up to superstrength, making them too valuable to get rid of.

And they only worked for Carl and Ashley.

For the rest of their careers, the two of them would be ordered to use the pink handcuffs.

The only good news of the entire mess was that the guy Ashley had her eyes on found out about her new equipment and was intrigued.

The new couple put the cuffs to good use.

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“What happened here?”

“Captain Marvel,” Yoruichi greeted the woman, looking far more severe than the heroine had ever seen the Consort in all the videos she had been shown of what had happened during her absence from Earth.

“What happened?” Carol Danvers asked again, fists tightening as she beheld what had once been a small Bialyan village.

Not even rubble remained after the torrent of electricity that had blasted the area into glass.

“The local militia thought the beast plague would help them overthrow the regime. I dealt with it already.”

Dealt with it.

The woman had killed everyone. Destroyed the town till nothing remained but this craterous wasteland.

She had been thorough enough that the repeated blasts of powerful lighting in the area had attracted Captain Marvel’s attention.

“Why,” the heroine bit out, impotent fury building in her chest.

“I just told you,” the dark-skinned woman raised a brow and smirked at the heroine. “They were planning on using the plague to kill Queen Bee, infecting the entire capitol with her in it.”

“Do you have any proof,” Captain Marvel asked, fist curling. “And why kill everyone? You could have arrested them and cured them.”

“Oh,” Yoruichi waved off her question airly. “Raven already came through the area. Everyone who wanted to be cured was and was dropped off somewhere safe. I only dealt with those that were left.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Do you have any proof?”

“None beyond my word.”

This was wrong. This was all wrong.

So long as they declared someone had the beast plague, these dragons had the right to kill and destroy whoever they wanted? What if someone wasn’t infected, and they just wanted them dead? Was the heroine just supposed to step aside and let the Elden Lord and its wives do whatever they wanted on ‘their word?’

Yet the heroine couldn’t even say there wasn’t a reason behind it. She, too, had been infected and not even realized it. She had seen those who became beasts and had felt a primal terror at the sight, a fear of becoming like that herself. She had taken the cure and touched the Elden Lord, all so she wouldn’t become a beast.

She had seen it happen to others.

The Punisher had made a great effort to hunt down criminals who sought to cause havoc with blood-enhanced strength.

He had become a terrible beast, the very thing he had fought against. The disaster could have been devastating if Goodwitch hadn't been in the area.

Only the dragons were immune; they were the only ones who could wade through the blood and were able to entirely destroy the infection down to the last drop.

Captain Marvel knew this. She understood this.

It was still wrong.

These had been people. Desperate people. What they had been planning was undoubtedly wrong, but they likely felt they had no choice. They were regular people who had been trying to overthrow a corrupt despot, a Master who had managed to secure UN approval and tied the Justice League's hands.

Was this to just be another compromise? Another of the lesser evils Carol had been forced to accept since she started her career as a heroine?

When had the world become so complicated?

Then Carol Danvers asked the question that needed to be asked.

"Why were you in Bialya in the first place?"

"Just dealing with the infected," Yoruichi said casually, but her cat-like eyes told the heroine to stop asking questions.

Time to press on, maybe she'd let something slip.

"Have you heard? Queen Bee is dead. Passed away only an hour ago."

"Can't say I'll miss her," Yoruichi answered back plainly. She didn't even blink, staring the heroine dead in the eyes. "Word on the vine was that she was a villain, Master, and serial rapist with her powers. Shame about these rebels. If they had waited a day, they might have made a different choice. But I doubt it. Anyone willing to use the Beastplague for their purposes will need to be hunted eventually."

Captain Marvel's knuckles popped from the force she clenched them.

"Nobody knows how she died," Carol continued, cataloging every twitch the other woman made. "Just fell over dead."

"How frightening."

"I was called because there was some fear about what to do with her body. Despite seeing the Grace of the Moon, she never went to get cured. Imagine my surprise when I got there and found her body completely cured… If it really is her body."

"Sounds like some sort of ghost story," the cat-woman smirked. "You'll have to tell me if anything comes of it."

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Not even a twitch.

Captain Marvel wasn't a Thinker, nor was she anywhere near as good as Batman when it came to interrogating people, but she had plenty of experience.

Yoruichi Shihouin was a stone-cold liar. She gave nothing away.

But Carol knew.

Yoruichi had killed these infected. She had killed Queen Bee. She had probably even killed some of the hundreds of public officials who were dying in drove around the world. Maybe all of them.

The Elden Lord's enemies were dropping like flies worldwide, all under mysterious circumstances, and the Justice League could do nothing.

What heroes left were so busy dealing with the void caused by their comrade's disappearance that they could barely spare a moment for anything else.

Carol Danvers was staring at an unrepentant assassin and mass murderer, and if they fought, the heroine would be the one the public would decry.

"We should get going," Yoruichi eventually said when Carol didn't speak for a long moment. "I understand you are very busy these days. So am I."

"You won't get away with this." Carol didn't even try to stop the words from coming out. They had been bottled for too long. "You. The Elden Lord. The rest of you. You won't get away with this."

"Get away with what?" Yoruichi asked guillessly.

"You know what."

Yoruichi sighed, and suddenly, the neutrality was gone. In its place was something else.

"Listen, girl-"

"Don't call me that."

"I'm older than your country," Yoruichi snapped back at the interruption. "I'll call you whatever I spirits-damn want to. Now listen to what I am saying or else."

Carol held her tongue, not out of fear, but in the hope that the dark-skinned woman would say something incriminating in her anger.

"You and everyone in a too-bright costume seem to think we need to be either the good guys or the bad. With you or against you. We've played along so far, but do not mistake my Family's complacence with compliance." Suddenly, the woman was right in front of Carol. She hadn't even seen her move. "Good. Evil. Some of us care about that. Most don't. We are maintaining a balance here, nothing more or less."

Yoruichi was shorter than Captain Marvel, yet the heroine felt a shiver of apprehension as cat-like eyes narrowed at her. It was like she was being pressed down by

the dragon's will, and Carol felt her lungs seize slightly at the woman's anger.

No.

Not anger.

Annoyance.

That's all Captain Marvel was to Yoruichi. A momentary annoyance. A yipping dog with no clue of how tiny and powerless it really was.

Anger replaced fear in Carol's chest, but Yoruichi didn't care for the woman's fury.

"This isn't some grand conspiracy to take over the world, steal power, or get away with 'crimes.' You all need to get over yourselves," Yoruichi gave the heroine a look of profound contempt. "If we wanted to destroy this world, we'd just leave. You'd do the work for us."

"Then why don't you," Carol snapped back. "This is not your planet. Leave!"

The pressure on Captain Marvel doubled. Tripled.

They were on the ground, Carol realized. They had ceased flying and were standing on the ground at some point.

And she wasn't imagining the pressure.

The Earth was flattened around the two women like someone had taken a hydraulic press to the entire area.

Carol could stand up to the pressure. She was one of the strongest heroines on the planet.

The Earth under her feet couldn't.

The terrifying aspect wasn't that the Earth caved under feet, lowering into the ground.

It was that it only pressed her down exactly as much as it needed to put the two women precisely at eye level with each other.

Carol Danvers had not been on Earth during Heartbreak, but she was suddenly very aware that she was staring down a woman who had soloed an Enbringer.

"Because some of us still care," Yoruichi answered simply. "And when one of us cares, all of us care. That's what it means to be Family."

Then the pressure and the woman were gone.

Captain Marvel was left in a destroyed town's ruined, flattened remains.

The heroine took a deep breath and let out her frustration through her nose.

"You shouldn't have done that," Batman's voice called over the coms.

"I wasn't wrong," Carol called back. "This is exactly what I was warning you about! This plague! Look what it's done. You know it's their fault."

"You weren't," Batman acknowledged. "And they are partly to blame. Mikael fully admitted that to me. But nor are they doing nothing to rectify it. Without giving anything

we can use as proof, Yoruichi as good as admitted to being the one behind the assassinations. But you missed the message she was trying to send, that the Elden Lord was trying to send through her."

"Enlighten me."

"Despite being able to leave as soon as she was done with the rebels, she was waiting for you. She brought up the Queen before you, though her targets. 'Anyone willing to use the Beastplague for their purposes needs to be hunted eventually.' She was telling us that Queen Bee was working with the blood plague."

"So we're just supposed to let her get away with the assassination of a world leader," Carol asked rhetorically. "I hated the bitch, but if we let them kill Queen Bee, why not let her kill the president of the US, the King of Britain, Magneto, Black Panther, or anyone else."

"That is part of the message Yoruichi sent," Batman explained. "Anyone with a brain can guess Mikael and his family are behind the killings. She was promising us to keep it to only those who messed with the blood. Everyone else, even influential political figures or powerful Supers who are actively trying to antagonize them, are being spared. They're not being indiscriminate."

"They're still killing whoever they want!"

Carol was shouting. She was yelling at Batman because she was angry.

Angry at the situation, the Elden Lord, at Yoruichi, at her inability to stop it all.

Why wasn't this simple? Punch the bad guys, save the day, go home. Rinse and repeat.

That was how it was supposed to go.

"…You've been in the field for days," Batman said slowly. "You need to rest."

"I need the world to return to normal," Captain Marvel denied. "Too many villains think they have a chance with the rest of the League gone and heroes gone. I don't have time to rest."

"It's not just sleep, I mean," Batman chided. "You need to get updated info before you snap and do something rash."

Captain Marvel felt a shiver down her back.

"…What happened?"

"I'll tell you when you get back."

"Bruce."

"…One of the warlords vying for power in China after the loss of Beijing was secretly being aided by a faction of the Japanese military. As far as we can tell, they were trying to replicate the 'lead from below' technique Imperial Japanese soldiers used during WWII,

hoping to lead Japan back to its colonial era by forcing a war with a divided mainland. They were trying to manufacture another Manchurian Incident."

"What. Happened." She didn't need background context. Carol needed answers.

"A rogue Japanese general led his four divisions to 'pacify' an area. The warlord found out and recruited everyone he could get his hands on, former soldiers and civilians. Both sides had Supers. Both sides spread the blood plague to their soldiers, who took it willingly. They hated the other side enough to turn into beasts."

Carol was former air force. She knew the classifications.

Four divisions were roughly ninety thousand soldiers.

Assuming rough parity, if in numbers, if not actual power because of civilian volunteers involved…

"Oh god."

"We have no way of calculating the total dead," Batman said sombrely. "Raven's shadow pulled those who wanted to be cured from the battle, but so many had turned to beasts by then. Ranni dealt with the rest. That Chill Moon spell Strange saved you from? It plateaued the area."

"How did we miss this?" Carol hissed, rage and heartbreak filling her in equal measures. "We could have stopped this. Should have stopped this!"

"We should have stopped a lot of things. I only learned about it because Wonder Woman, the one married to the Elden Lord, told me about it after it happened."

Carol heard it. The weariness. The sadness.

Bruce Wayne was willpower incarnate, but Carol knew it stemmed from a sense of responsibility just as potent.

He blamed himself for not catching and stopping the tragedy.

"With the infrastructure so damaged in that part of the world, the decentralizing of power, and the infighting," Batman continued reporting. "We've lost most sources of information. That's why I want you to come back and rest up. As soon as you get some sleep and are briefed, that will be your jurisdiction until things stabilize. You are one of the only ones who are fast enough, can fly, know the language, and have Justice League permission to act before reporting. We need someone there."

"Fine," Carol bit out. "What about the Elden Lord?"

"…Despite their designation as 'Global Villain,' they are not our priority. Our priority is to save human lives. Even if just from themselves."

Despite the promise of rest, exhaustion filled Carol.

They were addressing symptoms, not causes. They both knew it.

Until something changed, they were just buying time.

Sometimes, just sometimes, Carol wished a hero could save her.

Where was Superman when you needed him?

******

"Galatea is in Houston," Dragon reported. "I rerouted her to deal with Carnage."

"Houston?" Batman clarified. "Where's Eidolon?"

"Peru. A Master 7 has taken over Callao."

"Keep Supergirl in Star City then," Batman ordered, cataloguing the heroes' movement and changing plans in an eyeblink. Best the clone and the heroine didn't meet for the moment. No need to risk their continued ambivalence to each other. "Instead, contact the Protectorate in LA to send Kid Flash to Butte, Montana. He'll cover the east of the Rockies well with his speed. Falcon still has the mountains for the moment."

Anyone with a Mover rating above eight was to be separated by cities or states for maximum area coverage. With limited heroes to call on, force projections were important. To facilitate this, flyers or speedsters were placed in stratic areas to cover as wide a net as possible. Even if they couldn't stop a threat themselves, they could delay it long enough for backup to arrive.

A higher density of heroes was needed in populated and important locations, as those were most likely to be targeted by villains. Still, those usually had PRT and Protectorate teams in the area.

"Myrridin is requesting backup."

"Can you send a suit?"

"No, I am dealing with a new Tinker villain in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Their specialty is self-replicating tech.

"…Focus on that. We can't allow a Tinker like that to remain at large. What's happening with Myrridin?"

"A cabal of rogue magic users. Some sort of ritual on Lake Michigan. They've started a massive winter storm over the lake, and it is reaching hurricane levels of force."

"I'll contact Zatarra."

"And," Dragon's voice fell, heavy with regret. "Azrael has turned."

Turned.

He had become a beast.

Bruce closed his eyes for a moment.

Jean-Paul had answered the call to justice, just as he always had, but hadn't heeded his warnings about fighting the infected.

Then, the moment of mourning was over.

"Let Nico Robin know," Batman ordered. "Where is Raven?"

"She's on her second pass through Yemen," Dragon reported, one of her duties keeping track of the shadow as it moved back and forth over the world, ferrying the infected to the Elden Lord and back.

"When you talk to Nico Robin, have her relay a request to have her cover Genosha again."

"This will be the sixth time."

"A hemokinetic decided to try and overthrow Magneto."

"… Very well."

"What's the status of the satellites?"

"Indonesia is all set, but it will be a few more days before I have enough in the air to cover Russia and China. I have half of India covered, but they aren't powerful enough to make up for the lack of communication technology in that part of the world."

"Anything else requiring immediate attention?"

"No. The situation seems stable for the moment. Get some sleep. I'll alert you if needed."

Batman did just that.

Even with all his tricks, medicines, and willpower, he still needed to sleep after almost a week of nonstop work, with only the barest of breaks for food.

He set his alarm four hours from then and willed himself into darkness, trusting that he would be awoken in case of an emergency.

Batman would be up before Captain Marvel and could direct her to where she was needed. He just hoped she took his words to heart about needing to not antagonize the Elden Lord.

For now.

Batman knew this day would come.

Not necessarily in this exact fashion, but he had not ignored either Carol's warning about the 'Sleeper Plague' or his own belief that, eventually, Mikael would start disregarding Earth laws to do as he saw fit.

So yes, Batman had known a day like this would come.

It didn't mean he was ready.

It was too soon. So many of his plans relied on heroes that weren't available.

The goal had never been to kill the Elden Lord, just to provide enough of a deterrent that he left Earth rather than deal with those who opposed him.

As it was now, the world was like an ironic joke on that plan.

Mikael was the enemy of Earth, yet they could do nothing against him. More than that, any hero or law enforcement agent who tried to confront the man or his wives found themselves publicly humiliated in some fashion. ‘Harmless pranks,’ Mikael called them.

Batman knew it was partially Mikael’s sense of humour, but it was also an incredibly effective plot to alienate his enemies from the general populace.

This was why Bruce respected and feared Mikael. His power was prodigious, but his mind had Batman wary.

‘The blood plague originates from my Island,’ Mikael had told the Caped Crusader. ‘Waller’s team took an animal with it and gave it to a villain who cloned and spread it. Mister Sinister was probably using the X-men as a distraction, hoping I wouldn’t catch on. He failed. We have the kid and the mom and will bring them to Xavier as soon as they are cured. As far as I know, I am the only one who can cure it. And I will. It’s partly my fault.’

Ostensibly, Mikael was accepting responsibility, but there were three extra layers to those few sentences.

First, he mentioned Amanda Waller specifically and laid the start of the plague at her feet. Waller was a central US figure and had broken international law to gain the blood. Waller was the first leader who became mysteriously ‘incapacitated.’

Second, Mikael was also telling Batman that the heroes had also, unwittingly, been part of the problem. It wasn’t blackmail but a reminder that if Batman tried to lay the whole blame at his feet, he could take them down with him.

Third, the Elden Lord was making himself indispensable. Even if Batman had a perfect plan to fight him, which he didn’t, he couldn’t afford to antagonize the only source to provably able to cure the disease.

Looking back, as soon as Mikael had briefed him about the Bloodplague, days before the declaration of war and the Family’s reply, the Elden Lord had probably expected that extra-legal measures, including assassination and mass killings, would be required.

The poison and the cure.

A reliable tactic, one Batman had used himself when dealing with some of the trickier criminals of his city.

That was Mikael at his core. Simple strategies, not complex plans, taken to the extreme.

The speech in the Chill Moon was another example of a tactic just as simple. Lowering emotion, inciting fear and hopelessness, then raising them up, then lowering, then raising them again. An interrogation/torture trick as common as good cop/bad cop that left people psychologically vulnerable to influence.

The humiliation of heroes? It just proved the Elden Lord wasn’t the villain in the eyes

of the public. If he was, he would have killed them. So clearly, the heroes trying to arrest him were the bad guys.

With every day that passed, a simple PR campaign focused on humour and friendliness had spread belief in the Elden Lord as much as killing the Endbringers had.

And Batman could do nothing but allow him to get away with it.

If he spoke out now, he'd just be another of dozens of heroic figures to be dismissed. If he allowed Captain Marvel to fight Yoruichi or anyone to confront Ranni over the destruction of the armies, Batman would become not just a figure of mockery but part of the problem.

It would be easier to swallow as the Dark Knight biding his time until he could confront a villain at the best moment, fully prepared.

Only… even now, even after all the death and destruction Mikael and his family had caused, intentionally and not, Batman could not think of Mikael as a villain.

Everything the dragon had warned him about had come true.

From those who tried to fight the beasts, turning into beasts themselves, to using blood to cure wounds, to those trying to empower Supers and soldiers.

Batman had no doubt that if the Elden Lord hadn't healed everyone on the planet just a few weeks ago, countless people would turn to the blood to heal themselves from diseases or injuries.

The Elden Lord also was focusing on peacekeeping, more than enemy elimination.

If Mikael had asked people to rise against the governments calling him a villain, Bruce had no doubt that half the world would be consumed in civil wars.

Also, as warned, nobody else was able to handle the plague. All healers, magicians, mutants, or scientists had failed to find a way to cure people. Most couldn't even tell the infected from the clean. Only the Grace of the Moon in the eyes was a hundred percent indicator.

Without Mikael, Earth would have just become one of the countless planets lost to the 'Sleeper Plague.'

That was the issue.

For every problem Mikael and his Family caused, in the end, it was better to have them than not.

Even right now, the only reason Batman could spend days on end coordinating heroes all over the globe was because Nico Robin was a constant supervisor of Gotham in his absence. Without her, the city would have become a cesspool of beasts as soon as its terrible occupants learned of the potential of the blood.

Doomsday, Trigon, the Endbringers, even the Phoenix Force, in a way. There were so

many tragedies that could have been so much worse without the Elden Lord.

Batman didn't know if he was making the right decision to entrust his world's fate to Mikael.

He just knew it was the best of bad options.

Author's Note:

As usual, Side Stories focuses more on side characters and fleshing out the world. Both from the random Joe's perspective and that of more important characters on a global stage. Perspectives, beliefs, responses. These will all differ from person to person, culture to culture. That has been an undercurrent of this fic I have also been trying to get across.

Too many stories, especially comics, forget about the 'individual' and easily lump every civilian or hero into groups. It's Stark's side Vs. Captain America's. Villains Vs. Heroes. Supporters of heroes Vs detractors. It makes storytelling easier, but I prefer more complexity and more nuance.

Joe Schmo on the side of the road might be another face in the crowd to you, but to him, he is the protagonist. He has thoughts on politics, specific heroes, and the state of the world. He might not be Captain America, but he has his own convictions.

Anyway, the next two SSs will be on the lewder side. I will see you all next week.

PS: I want to correct something many people need clarification after the last chapter. This fic is not a commentary or allegory to the Jan 6th capital riot. It is not a propagandized attempt to sway people or comment on current issues. The reason that date was chosen was purely for story reasons, and I hadn't even realized the coincidence till someone pointed it out in the comments in the last chapter.

To quote Atlus (Since Persona 3 Reloaded is coming out today): This story is a work of fiction. Similarities between characters or events to persons living or dead in your world are purely coincidental.

I certainly have my own views, but I understand that not everyone holds the same ones, and one of my pet peeves is when authors force those views onto a narrative without rhyme or reason. This is a fanfiction. Not a political platform. It is meant to be enjoyed, not push an agenda.

If a website or its moderators believe I violate their rules, I have no problem pulling this story from that site. I publish on eight different sites concurrently, and anyone who has reached this point in Rapturous Rhapsody should have no trouble finding another site to read the last few chapters when they come out.

But I will not change the ending I had planned for two years just because people see political messaging where I had no intention of putting one.

There are messages, themes, and such I want people to take away from my work, but they have nothing to do with politics, current events, or religion. Those subjects are entirely subjective and not something I wish to discuss. I wish to write about people and experiences we can all identify with, no matter who we are, where we are from or what we believe in.

SIDE STORY VIII: CAT SCRATCH FEVER (ADULT)

"The backbone of surprise is fusing speed with secrecy."
-Carl von Clausewitz

"Mikael?!" Yoruichi's yell echoed through the mansion.

"In the living room," I called back, nowhere near as loud.

It didn't even take a second for my lap to be filled with the dark-skinned Shinigami. I set aside my tea and my book, my alone time obviously over, as Yoruichi lay on top of me on the couch, rubbing her face aggressively against my abs.

"Sooo," I asked with a bemused smile. "How'd it go with Queen Bee?"

"Hm?" Yoruichi looked up from rubbing her face on me to look me in the eyes. "Oh, she's dead. And I found a rebel group using the blood, so I dealt with them too."

"Good job," I nodded. "I appreciate you helping me with the hunt."

"It's nothing," Yoruichi sighed, laying her chin on my chest.

"But something happened, didn't it?"

"I stuck around to pass your message to the Bat on," the former captain explained with a grumpy pout. "It was that Captain Marvel girl that showed up."

"Was she a problem," I asked with a frown.

I hadn't dealt with that heroine in any particular fashion since arriving; she had been off-world for most of my time on Earth. If she had tried to pull something with one of my wives I would need to have a… talk with her.

"Not really," Yoruichi sighed again. "Just got me frustrated, is all."

"How come?"

"It just… She's naive. Way more naive than she should be for having so much power. Like a captain who's never dealt with a hollow."

"One of your captains was a centuries-old child," I deadpanned. "A few others acted like children. Hell, one even had a bankai around children's games, and another's lieutenant was a literal child spirit. Why is a hero being naive frustrating?"

"That's different," Yoruichi denied. "Everyone has their quirks, but the captains did what needed to be done. But I've met so many heroes here that are just… ignorant. Like they think everything is black and white, or should be at least."

"And Captain Marvel was like that?"

"She said we 'wouldn't get away with this,'" Yoruichi drawled sarcastically. "Like

killing a mind-controlling rapist and tyrant was a great crime, or that removing people who are willingly working with a plague was a bad thing. It was practically written on her face that anyone who kills is automatically evil. That would be like saying all Shinigami should do was purify Pluses and not kill hollows because they were once people, too."

"To be fair," I said, playing devil's advocate as I hugged my wife. "We have been killing a lot of people, and they don't know what we know. Even a pragmatic mind would see our body count and flinch a bit."

"We're doing what needs to be done," Yoruichi scowled. "It's not about good and evil, life and death. It's about maintaining a balance so the world can keep turning. Reality does not care about a hero's morality."

"It doesn't care about anyone's morality," I agreed with a nod, trailing my fingers down her side gently. "But you also must realize that people do not see life and death as you or I do. Not only are we much older and have more experience with death, but we also know that there are systems in place for most of the people we kill. An afterlife or reincarnation. To most, death is just that. The End."

"That's not a bad thing," Yoruichi argued back. "Some things need to end."

"I agree," I nodded again, understanding she wasn't arguing with me but with the people who weren't there. "But an ending goes against the fundamental conceit these words are based on. Nothing can end, good or bad. When someone is killed, they lose any possibility of being redeemed, of living up to their potential for the betterment of others. A core philosophy of many heroes is that anyone has the potential to do good. It kind of has to be that way for many because otherwise, they won't be able to put themselves in the line of fire for people who they think will make the world a worse place. No hero knows everyone they save, but all good heroes try to save everyone."

"I suppose," Yoruichi snuggled into my hug. "I guess I just expected more of them to be like Diana. Heroic, but practical. She hates that we must do this but knows it needs to be done and can accept it."

"When I first chose all of you, I made sure everyone was at least compatible enough that such small issues wouldn't crop up," I reminded her.

"Yes," Yoruichi drawled, but there was a slight smile on her face. "Your choice of 'waifus' has absolutely no downsides."

"I don't regret a single one of my choices," I admitted honestly. "Especially not you." Yorucihi's eyes widened a tiny fraction, and her face gained the smallest of blushes at my blunt honesty. "I know I've thanked you before, but I will thank you again. Thank you, Yoruichi, for helping me with my hunt. The night might be long, but I am not alone, thanks to you."

“Like I said,” Yoruichi said, trying to feign casualness as she rested her head against my chest again. “It’s nothing.”

“No,” I denied. “It’s something. It means a lot to me that you and the others are willing to get your hands dirty to help.”

“Well…” Yoruichi decided to hide her embarrassment with her usual defence. Teasing. “If you want to thank me, you can make me feel better. A nice welcome home quickly sounds good, don’t you think?”

Too bad for Yoruichi I had already been thinking about how to reward her for the last few hours.

“Tell you what,” I said with a grin, rolling her off me to stand up. I made a show of starting to stretch. “Let’s have a race. That will make you feel better.”

“A race?” Yoruichi asked, looking more amused at the thought than anything else. “You? With me?”

“Ouch,” I deadpanned. “Right in my ego. Try not to sound too confident. I might win.”

“No,” the Goddess of Flash stood with a light laugh. “You won’t. If I gave you a few days headstart, sure. But a plain race? You won’t win.”

“We’ll see,” I answered back smugly.

Technically, she was telling the truth. None of my powers from my time in prison gave me any speed boost. Nor did my Elements. I could Free myself from the slowing forces like air drag, the conservation of momentum, or even the limit of the speed of light, but that just raised the cap on my theoretical speed infinitely. My base remained the same. Theoretically, I could accelerate without end, but the ramp-up took time.

And a race with clear limits of start, end, and path? I was almost guaranteed to lose.

My enhanced strength allowed me to propel myself at superhuman speeds, but that was nowhere near Speedforce levels. Yoruichi wasn’t there yet either, but as a Dragon of Speed, she was getting closer and closer every day. Maybe once she raised another Tier. But even when she had been first summoned, she had been faster than I was now.

In combat, I could cheat. My burgeoning Observation Haki, still in its infancy, could allow me to keep up with those faster than me, combined with any number of traps I could lay out to slow them down.

I was making up for my deficiencies slowly. Whether it was learning to channel Aura with Glynda, learning Primordial Runes with Scathach, Reinforcement with Medea, or a type of Mana Burst from Artoria, I was shoring up my lack of speed, my greatest combat weakness in a world of heroes.

That still put me months away from being able to catch Yoruichi when she was first

summoned, let alone now.

We both knew it.

And we both knew I had something planned.

I wasn't the type to make a challenge I couldn't win, even if it was to make Yoruichi feel better.

"You're up to something." Cat-like eyes were narrowed in suspicion, but her mouth was quirked into a grin. The curiosity alone had her metaphorical tail wagging.

"I'd never!" I gasped, scandalized at the implications on my honour.

"Uh huh," Yoruichi nodded sassily. "This race totally isn't some sort of scheme of yours. You definitely just want to cheer me up with a run. Nothing else."

"I admit, there is a tiny hint of a secondary motive, but it is just because I remembered something I needed to do," I answered guilessly, my smile as innocent as could be. "But that's harmless. Unless you mean to tell me you don't want to have some fun?"

Just as she knew I was planning something, I also knew she'd accept anyway. Maybe at any other sort of contest, she'd reject, but the Goddess of Flash turning down a race?

It'd be like Artoria turning down food. (That wasn't mashed potatoes. The heathen.)

"You're on," Yoruichi answered, dropping her orange overshirt to leave her only in her leotard. Then she started stretching, making sure to be as distracting as possible while doing so. "What are the rules?"

I almost didn't answer, too caught up in the sight of her cat-like movements.

"The first stop is the northernmost point of the Island. Once I beat you there, you'll call out different targets. I'll beat you to all of them. I win when you give up. You win if you beat me once."

Dark skin rippled as she bent and twisted, her skintight clothing not doing even a passable job of concealing her form.

The material clung so tightly that I could see the defined muscles of her legs flex as she lifted one foot to the ceiling in a split that had nothing to do with stretching and everything to do with showing off the camel toe of her crotch.

While my eyes had zeroed in on that area, they didn't remain there for long.

Yoruichi, with arms clasped behind her back, bent forward. The sleeveless black tights held her bust in place so it didn't bounce, but it did nothing in this position, letting me watch her hefty breasts dangle low enough that her nipples, erect from my eyes watching her, brushed the ground as she stretched her lower back.

Then, those breasts were facing the ceiling again as she bent backwards. In another demonstration of her flexibility, Yoruichi grasped the back of her ankles, bending her back

in a C-shape to do so.

Which, again, emphasized her breasts.

And her wonderfully toned stomach flexing beneath the thin fabric.

Must. Not. Lick.

But… Mmm, chocolate.

"You know," I said conversationally, pretending she wasn't having any effect on me. "If you are trying to distract me, it's probably because you are afraid of losing."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Yoruichi grinned like the cat who got the canary.

She kept that grin as she bent forward once again but made sure she was facing away from me.

How'd I know she was still grinning?

Because her face peeked through her legs as she folded herself in half, toned ass facing me.

She wiggled her hips.

It bounced, flesh rippling like a wave.

I was only human… err, I was only a man.

I smacked dat ass, sending it jingling and bouncing some more.

Yoruichi stood up, triumphantly looking over her shoulder and up at me.

She was way too smug for someone bite-sized.

Yoruichi was the shortest of my wives at only 156 centimetres, or five foot and an inch and a half.

She made up for it by being the most smug and overtly sexual of my wives. While a few of them were not shy about their desires, such as Scathach, Pride, or Emma, Yoruichi was the only one to actively tease me sexually.

Taunting, prodding, and with an exhibitionist streak a mile long, she often made people forget how small she really was by having the force of personality of a much larger woman.

Not to say parts of her weren't large. The tits and ass on the Shinigami would make any other woman jealous, but on her tiny frame, they were positively obscene.

And she knew it.

I spanked her ass again, harder this time.

"Just for that, I am giving you a head start," I said tauntingly as I watched her eyes narrow in hunger as she looked up at me.

I made sure to loom as much as possible, my frame blocking the light completely, my shadow engulfing her entirely.

I was over a foot and a half taller than her and twice as wide, and I made sure she knew it.

My draconic eyes bore into her feline orbs, both pairs hungry. My smirk was all fangs as I projected my Conquoror's Haki to weigh her spirit down.

Her Reiatsu tried to flex in response, but I didn't allow it.

My Will crushed her spirit, wiping it from the world.

Yoruichi's breath hitched.

Her nipples, already beaded in arousal, twitched as her breasts heaved with desire. Her thighs twitched, an unconscious spasm.

I read her body like a book.

I saw her realize what I was doing here. Why I had challenged her to a race.

Yoruichi had realized that the race was but a part of my plan to cheer her up and thank her for the effort.

The race was just the precursor, the qualification.

The real gift came later.

She knew I had remembered.

A conversation so long ago that I had forgotten it among all the rest of what followed. A promise I made and hadn't kept.

Well, I intended to keep it now.

But I had to prove I deserved it, just like I promised.

And she had to make it challenging, or it wouldn't matter.

I smacked her ass a third time.

"What are you waiting for," I taunted. "Run Kitty!"

Yoruichi ran.

I paused, then I chased, laughing all the while.

I caught up as Yoruichi left the manor's front door, blasting through the glass without care.

I passed her with another smack on her ass, my laugh swallowed by the distance.

At the speeds we were going, it took less than a second to reach the northern tip of my Island.

"How'd you do that?" Yoruichi asked, looking up at me with narrowed eyes of suspicion. "You're not that fast. Not without a lead-up."

She was panting, but it had nothing to do with being out of breath.

I just smiled hungrily.

"Where to? …Kitty."

"Out of your little world," Yoruichi challenged with a grin of her own. "Top of the

Daily Planet."

"After you," I said, sketching a sarcastic bow.

She left while I was still folded in half.

I caught up right before we reached land. This time the spank was on the other ass cheek.

Needed to make sure they were balanced, after all.

Again, despite the distance travelled, it hadn't even taken us more than one second before we stood right above one of the tallest buildings in Metropolis.

"Are you going to give up," I asked, knowing we were nowhere near done yet.

"No way. You might have passed me in a burst, but let's see if you can go the distance."

"Then where to, oh Goddess of Flash?"

"Tokyo Tower." And Yoruichi was gone.

I gave chase to my teasing, chocolate, short-stack, death god, catgirl wife.

…Maybe I should write a light novel?

It took us a full two seconds this time. Partly because of the distance, partly because instead of spanking her tight ass, I surpassed her and turned around to tweak a nipple lightly.

"South Pole!" Yoruichi, with a faint blush on her face, shouted into the night.

The snow posed me no problem as I tweaked the other nipple.

"North Pole!"

I kissed her on the neck as I surpassed her.

Santa wasn't there, which was a shame. I guess he wasn't real in this comic world.

This was also the time Yoruichi started getting serious.

The snow melted as lightning surrounded her body as she engaged her Shunko, a technique to enhance her speed and power.

I pecked her on the lips as we raced towards Kathmandu.

I trailed my fingers across her toned stomach before overtaking her on our way to Santiago.

I yanked her ponytail roughly right before she reached Bangkok.

Over and over again, Yoruichi would declare some city or landmark and take off. I'd race after her, tauntingly playing with her body as I passed.

We must have circumnavigated the globe a few dozen times, Yoruichi growing increasingly flustered at each stop before she finally snapped.

"One last race," Yoruichi panted. Her eyes were dilated as wide as I had ever seen them. Her chest heaved, sweat beading it. Her crotch was absolutely soaked, her arousal

leaking down her shivering legs and leaving a large damp spot on her groin. “One last race, and you win.”

She didn’t care that she looked like a hot mess in the middle of a plaza of Luxembourg, her lightning not hiding her frazzled state, and people were staring and taking pictures of us.

No, that wasn’t true.

Yoruichi did care about the eyes on her. They were turning her on more.

Not that she needed much help. She was already in this state, and we had only left the mansion five minutes before.

My last teasing touch had been a fingernail scraping along the cloth outside her cunt for the briefest of seconds.

“I do like the sound of that,” I said conversationally as I made a show of licking my finger clean. I saw her thighs twitch with desire once more. “So? Where to, Pet?”

“Up there,” Yoruichi smirked, pointing up at the sky. The cockiness on her face was ruined by the way her thighs rubbed together.

“The moon?” I asked with a raised brow.

“No. Not far enough to stretch my legs,” Yoruichi denied, lowering herself till she was on all fours. Like a tiger ready to pounce. “Mars.”

Lightning exploded, and thunder boomed. Yoruichi’s clothes disintegrated as she half-transformed into her feline form. A physical tail grew from her lower back, and lighting shaped itself around cat ears on her head and claws on her hands and legs.

The crowd stumbled and shouted in a panic at the transformation.

Her eyes were only on me, her lightning Reiatsu shifting with her every fickle thought in a chaotic mess. All more profound thoughts had left her.

Yoruichi was little more than a violent beast at the moment, moving according to her whims.

And those whims were focused wholly on me.

I wasn’t worried. I was staring at her naked ass.

Yoruichi disappeared too fast for anyone to track.

“Bad kitty,” I murmured with a smile as I raced into the sky after her.

It takes light around three minutes to reach Mars from Earth.

We made it in less than two.

That’s what happens when a Dragon of Speed goes all out, even if she hasn’t cracked the Speedforce.

I didn’t even tease the poor Shinigami as I passed her. I just waited upon the red surface of Earth’s nearest planet.

Caught up in her thunder beast form, she had no plans of stopping to congratulate me on my win.

Yoruichi crashed into me with the force of a meteor, the planet's rocky surface cratering around us and sending dust high into the sky.

Immediately, she tried to tear my pants to ribbons.

I didn't let her.

I caught her nude body with one hand; with the other, I delivered on a promise long overdue.

Click.

The collar closed around a dark skin clad in lighting.

It wasn't one of those designed for bondage, like I used with Diana or Glynda, with their buckles and loops.

It was a simple strip of leather holding a circular tag.

"Gack!" Yorucihi choked and froze, dangling from my arm as her muddled brain tried to process what had happened.

I spent that time admiring the woman in my hands, her body tight and plump in equal measure. The lighting shifted and arced around Yoruichi, her tail swaying and curling.

The cat collar was the only piece of clothing on her.

Finally realizing what had happened, since she couldn't see her neck, Yoruichi redoubled her effort to tear the clothes from my body, kicking, clawing and squirming for freedom.

When I didn't let go, her growls turned to animalistic whimpers, bucking her naked hips at me, trying to entice me to fuck her.

I didn't.

I still had to make this… memorable.

"Now, Kitty," I said kindly as I ran the hand, not holding her tight, through her scalp to scratch at the base of her cat ears. Yorucihi went limp in my hand, all fight to leave her as her chest rumbled in a purr that should have been impossible, but damn if it didn't turn me on. "I'm not going to have sex with you on Mars."

Her tail dropped.

I was going to hell.

"The sand will get everywhere. Instead, we're going for one last run. Back to Earth. I am giving you a headstart. But this time, when I catch you, I am going to fuck you. Right there. No matter where you are. Do you understand? Slow blink for yes."

Her tail swished. Lighting crashed around us in her excitement, turning the surface of Mars into glass. Her tongue lolled out, its tip sparking with electricity.

Wide golden eyes stared at me and blinked.

I dropped her, and she took off.

I gave Yorucihi a full ten seconds of a head start this time since it would actually be our last race.

Ten.

I laughed lightly, looking around the area. An enormous crater in the ground, half of it glassed from her lighting. We were only on the red planet for like two seconds, so it would give anyone looking a connection as they tried to figure out what happened.

Eight.

Man, she had made a mess. I hadn't planned to leave Earth, so that had thrown off my plan. I'd save having sex on another planet for a later day when we were really on Mars.

Six.

I had intended to only give Yoruichi the collar at the end, but she was so keyed up that I needed to do something to coral her.

Four.

Besides, this could turn her on even more. And that was the entire purpose of foreplay.

Two.

Good sex was a mostly mental thing anyway, unlike what most thought. If you knew your partner's fetishes and knew how to play them, you didn't need some sort of donkey dick or dextrous muscle control. The sex magic helped make things more convenient, but it wasn't necessary.

Zero.

I blasted off of Mars in my best Dragon Ball takeoff, careening through space after my sex pet.

I caught up to her in a heartbeat.

Yoruichi knew it too, cat-like eyes looking over her shoulder to meet mine, wide in fear and desire.

Not fear of being caught, but of being caught too soon.

My Shinigami doubled down, running faster and faster and faster toward Earth.

I was right behind her the entire way.

On her tail, you could say.

This wasn't about catching her or getting back to Earth.

This was about her choosing how she wanted to do this.

In her Thunder Beast form, Yoruichi operated on pure instinct and whim. No consideration for anything but what she wanted or felt.

In other words, Yoruichi was operating on pure Horni Brain.

And I knew how this would go.

Like most fetishes, hers lay in the complete contrast to her day-to-day life.

If she had wanted to fuck as soon as possible, Yoruichi would have opened a portal to the Island, but I knew she wouldn't. She got off on the adrenaline line of the race. She got off on the chase, the hunt. She got off on trying to escape and failing.

And, more than anything else, Yoruichi got off on having eyes on her.

The taboo of a Noble, of the captain of the Onmitsukidou, the equivalent of a ghost-ninja.

Yoruichi wanted to be seen at her lowest and be laid bare before the world. To be nothing but a drooling sex pet and have everyone know.

And any place I chose to give her that wish would be worse than what she chose for herself in her most primal state.

So I dogged her heels, right over her shoulder the entire race back.

I wasn't idle as we ran.

My hands lashed out, smacking her ass, twitching the tip of her tail, yanking her hair, or twisting a nipple. Little reminders that I was right behind her.

A conscious mind would have realized I could capture her at any point, but in her state, Yorucihi just ran harder and faster.

I knew it was time when we reached Earth, and less than an eyeblink later, Yoruichi's foot fumbled for the tiniest of instants.

On anyone else, it could have been an accident,

On Yoruichi, it was her body screaming to me, 'Here! Catch me here! Fuck me right here!"

So I did.

On a busy street in an upper-class neighbourhood in Kyoto, Japan, a place very similar to the noble districts of the Seireitei, I caught a naked Yoruichi Shihouin by the waist.

The road shattered as we crashed, a massive divot in the street appearing with the 'Boom' of our landing.

People froze. Traffic stopped.

All eyes zeroed in on the crater, as long-honed instincts from living in a comic-based world told them to evaluate the situation for fight or flight.

They saw me balls deep in Yoruichi.

"MRRROOOWWWW!" Yoruichi yowled, a feral sound of lust and satisfaction as I finally took her.

She was on all fours, head pressed into the ground and ass arched to the sky as I rammed into her soaking pussy. Her claws scrapped along the rubble of the street, carving furrows in the ground as I pounded away.

The ‘Smack. Smack. Smack.’ of my hips smashing her ass cheeks was audible over the buzzing of electricity and her desperate, keening mewls of pleasure.

Her dark-skinned butt jiggled and clapped with my every thrust, her tail twitching and turning, cat ears bent back in submission as I fucked my new pet into the street.

Without anything to conceal our nudity, without any of the drapery of civilization or the pretention of nobility.

It was raw. It was brutal.

It was animalistic fucking at its most primal. Two beasts mating, uncaring for who saw, who watched, and what they thought.

And Yoruichi loved it.

Her tail wrapped itself around my waist, pulling me deeper, tugging me to fuck her harder, to take her, to breed her, to make her my pet like I had promised so long ago.

To fuck her so hard and so good that even a free-spirited cat like her would have no choice but to continually return to me.

She threw herself into the mating with wild abandon, her pussy squeezing, twisting, and milking me for all I was worth as her ass bounced, her nipples rubbed themselves raw on the cement, and her mouth an unending tide of mewls, yowls, and growls of pleasure.

The crowd was starting to recover from the shock. Some fled, but they were the rare few. Most simply stared in confusion, arousal, and fear. One or two on the younger side thought of pulling out their phones to take pictures or a video.

“What’s happening?”

“Who is that?”

“Elden Lord.”

“Woah.”

“Are they… having sex!?”

“In public!”

“Woah.”

“Lucky bitch.”

“This is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“They can’t!”

“Woah.”

When the shouting started, all it did was send Yoruichi into a frenzied clamour, redoubling her efforts to fuck herself against me as hard and fast as possible.

Then I really started laying into her.

My thrusts picked up speed, one hand holding her neck down as the other smacked her ass cheeks in an alternating pattern, turning the dark skin red from the bruising. I considered it a personal insult if her cheeks weren't clapping every moment of our brutal fucking.

Her pussy spasmed and contracted, the lighting heating us up to deadly levels for a regular human, but just increasing our pleasure as we let out a caterwaul of bliss.

People watched, recorded, shouted, jeered, insulted, and cried all manner of obscenities. Our lack of shame, our raw passion, was rilling up the crowd into a frenzy. If this were a less repressive culture, I imagine an orgy might have broken out, but this was still Japan. A very traditional part of Japan at that. We received far more scandalized scoffs than lust-filled catcalls.

It didn't matter what they said or did; it all just went into fueling Yoruichi's animalistic lust further.

She finally reached a breaking point when we were finally accosted.

"Halt!" An imperious female voice shouted as a heroine in a red costume flew down in front of us. I didn't recognize her, and I didn't stop. Yoruichi growled at the intruder, but as soon as I thrust back into her wet folds, she returned to mewling. "Cease this lurid act!"

I waved my hand, and crystal encased the heroine from her neck to her feet.

"Stay there and watch," I growled, lost in my own beast-like frenzy. "Like everyone else."

That was what finally did it for my black cat, the vocalization of what was happening, the confirmation that the entire world was watching her get fucked into the ground.

"RRRRRAAAAAOOOOOOOO!!!!" Yoruichi *howled,* the continual bombardment of stimuli too much for her.

This entire session of animalistic rutting had been one long series of micro-orgasms for her, but my words sent her over the edge into a full-body release.

Her orgasmic roar shook the air, her tail puffing up and standing straight, and her ears twitching madly as she shuddered and bucked. Her pussy contracting so tightly that I had to use reinforcement on my dick to keep it from being squished.

Then Yoruichi sagged, collapsing to the ground in a limp pile as the lightning dissipated around us. My dick was still in her, holding her waist up by our connection, but the rest of her was a puddle of flesh on the ground, shuddering in the after-effects of her orgasm.

The world seemed to hold its breath at that moment, the crowd wondering what would happen next as the heroine I didn't know looked at us with wide eyes.

I was debating whether to bring us home to continue, to fuck the unconscious woman until she woke up, or to simply let her rest when Yoruichi made the choice for me.

Moving as fast as I'd ever seen her move, the Shinigami pushed herself off the ground with her arms. Legs locking around my thighs at just the right time to hold them straight, as she bent her body with nothing but her core muscles until both her arms were wrapped around my neck, back pressed against my chest, and legs around my waist.

In one move, Yoruichi had made us go from practically prone boning to me standing straight and her much smaller frame wrapping backwards around me like I was some sort of draconic strip-pole.

All without taking my dick out of her tight pussy.

"I thought you'd forgotten," she said, voice husky as she leaned her head back to stare up at me, one hand leaving the back of my head to trail along her new collar.

I realized she still had the cat ears, as well as the tail and fur around her arms and legs that led to claws. Yoruichi was still half transformed but without the lightning or the mental pollution.

Had I fucked her back into sanity?

"I did," I admitted, leaning down for a kiss. "When I was finally free, I tried to lock my memories of my time in those worlds in place. I was successful, for the most part, but only what I remembered at that point. Even after millions of years, I still remember Bloodborne perfectly, but the further I go back, the hazier they get. I made that promise centuries before I was free, right when I left the cell, if I am remembering correctly."

"You are," Yorucihi kissed me gently. Her teeth, tiny fangs, nibbled on my lip. In response, my hands reached down for her chocolate breasts, the generous bust looking outrageously large on such a small girl. I kneaded them, twisting, pinching, and mauling them as Yoruichi held herself against me. "Oooooohhh, yesssss," she hissed in pleasure. "Use your pet. I've been waiting over a year for this."

"I'm sorry," I drawled, pinching her nipples between my fingers and yanking. Yoruichi mewled in pleasure, and her pussy clenched again. "I didn't know I was dissapointing you in bed until now."

"You, ah, weren't. Nngggg. But, I, grr, I was waiting, ah, for my, AAHH, my collar."

"I hope the wait was worth it." I kept my hands squeezing those magnificent breasts, tit-flesh spilling out between my fingers as I gave Yoruichi a thrust. Her arms clamped tight around the back of my neck as her legs seized my thighs, holding me fast.

"It, mmmm, it was," the Shinigami panted, eyes hazy. "What about… what about them?" The watching crowd had not been silent as we talked, watching, yelling, jeering, and catcalling. The more prudish types had already fled, but the crowd had only grown as

more and more eyes came to rest on our naked bodies. “Is this annnnnggggg illusion?”

“No,” I denied, giving another experimental thrust. She clenched again, but I wasn’t able to get much leverage with her limbs locking me down. “These are real people. They are really watching you. No, I won’t have Emma erase their memories. And yes, they will remember you. Remember us fucking in public, of seeing you naked.”

Yorucihi shuddered out a low, keening wail as she came again.

“Hoooooowwwww?!” She demanded as her body shuddered against me.

“A few hundred thousand sleeping people I chose at random to pull into the Dream with you,” I admitted casually, my hands lowering to the deathgod’s thighs and pulling them apart so she was no longer clamping on my waist. Her tail wrapped around my wrist, but I didn’t let it stop me. “We’ve been in one since you joined me on the couch. When these fine folks wake up from a good night’s rest, they will remember this as nothing more than a vivid dream. But they will remember it.”

I couldn’t do something like this in real life, not when I still needed the appeal to the court of public opinion, but it also required to be as real as possible for Yorucihi. This was as close a workaround as I could get.

My arms lifted her thighs, blocking her arms with her legs as my hands locked behind her head. With careless ease, I lifted Yoruichi, her breasts smushed between my forearms as I held her in place.

Then I started fucking her again.

“Fuuuuuccccckkkkkkkk meeeeeeeeee,” Yoruichi groaned as I pounded her in a full nelson. Her tits and nipples, her pussy, my dick plunging into it, and her blissed-out face were all visible for everyone to see. “They can seeeeee meeeeeeeeee.”

“They can,” I grunted, my hips thrusting upward in a fast passed rhythm as she bounced, ass clapping and tits trembling as I fucked her in front of hundreds of people. “They can see all of you. They’re watching me fuck my new Kitty.”

Her dark chocolate skin contrasted with the pink of her pussy, which stood out against my lightly tanned dick. Her nipples pink nipples swayed and bounced as her breasts rolled. Her face was a mask of pleasure, golden feline eyes wide, teeth clenched, and drool dribbling down her lips.

It was a depraved image. One of wanton sluttishness and sexual desire. As far a cry from the stuck-up noble of her youth as Yoruichi could get.

Yoruichi came again. Explosively. Pussy spasming violently as she squirted hard enough that drops landed on the unnamed heroine’s face.

I kept bouncing her, my dick digging deep into the folds of her cunt from this angle.

I intended this show to last as long as possible.

I should have known Yoruichi wouldn't be the type to be down and out for long. She had realized I hadn't cum yet and took it as a personal insult.

"You crazy bastard," Yoruichi panted with lust, eyes clouded but voice remarkably clear despite her body still shuddering from her most recent release. "All this. All this just so you can put a collar around my neck?"

"All this so my horny cat will come crawling back for more," I grit out.

Thanks to Sticky Fingers, I could hold my release off indefinitely, but the longer I spent on the edge, the more the pressure built. And I had been on the edge for the last ten minutes.

So, of course, that was when Yoruichi started playing dirty. She hadn't been passive this entire time, but nor had she been as teasing or seductive as I knew she could be.

"You did it," the Shinigami mewled. "I'm collared. I'm never leaving. I'm just a sex kitten now, aren't I? Your sex kitten."

I slammed upwards, over and over again, making sure to drag the crown of my dick through her folds as roughly as possible. Yoruichi didn't even pause for breath, her words coming out faster and in a panting voice.

"That's what you wanted, isn't it? A pet? A naughty pussy you can rub and pet and fuck whenever you want? A slutty cat you can fuck in front of the whole world to show who owns this stray cat?"

The woman knew how to push my buttons. I wasn't an exhibitionist like her, but I was possessive, and she had no problems trying to work me over just like I did her.

The sights, the sounds, the smells, it was all mounting. The pressure was building, and it needed a release.

"That's what you want. To own me. To claim me. And to make sure everyone knows it. So fuck me. Fuck your pet. Dump your cum deep in me and give me kittens. Make sure everyone watching knows exactly who owns this pussy!"

Brown breasts with pink nipples bouncing roughly.

A muscled abdomen clenching and twitching in a hypnotic ripple.

The 'Clap, clap, clap,' of bouncing asscheeks against my hips.

Her tight pussy clamping on my dick, ensuring every thrust was a battle.

The eyes of the crowd, the flash of cameras, the eyes of some random heroine watching us, Sticky Fingers allowing me to read her desire for it to be her, not my wife, that I was fucking in public.

And Yoruichi's teasing, taunting words.

I released with an animalistic roar of my own, blowing load after load of pearlescent cum into Yoruichi's waiting womb without ever stopping my thrusts.

I pounded and pounded and pounded, savouring the tight wetness of Yoruichi's spasming cunt, the squeal of delight that escaped her clenched teeth. I came so much that great strands of it escaped our point of contact, white lines trailing down chocolate thighs in stark contrast.

Eventually, my orgasm tapered out, and my thrusting slowed as I heaved deep breaths.

Yoruichi purred in my arms, a vibration throughout her entire body.

I savoured the moment, the closeness despite the sheer amount of depravity we had just engaged in.

But we weren't alone.

"Can… Can you let me go now," the red-faced heroine asked in embarrassment.

"No," Yoruichi denied, twisting her body in a display of acrobatic flexibility that boggled the mind as she practically flowed from my arms to fall to her knees at my feet.

Immediately, she took my fluid-covered dick in her mouth, cleaning it up as she spoke.

"'Ou are 'oing to 'atch." Yoruichi's lips left the tip of my cock with a wet 'Pop' as she looked at the heroine, then at everyone else surrounding us. "You all are going to watch as Master fucks his new pet. This is going to be the wettest dream of your life."

Then she took my dick all the way into her throat, lips reaching my hips as she deep-throated me.

The poor heroine looked at me in hope, but I just shrugged with a smile as one hand reached down to scratch Yoruichi behind the ears as she continued to try and suck out my soul through my cock.

What a naughty kitty I have.

Author's Note:

This might be the most depraved thing I've written yet... Ehhhh, I'm sure I'll top it eventually.

For those curious, the promise Mikael was talking about was what he and Yoruichi talked about all the way back in Confinement 2. I get the tingles when I tie things back to when I first planned them, and I have had this one on the back burner for a long time.

The next chapter will be another lewd, though probably more wholesome, and then we will be back onto the main story as we ride this fic right to the end.

SIDE STORY IX: TO THE PYRE (ADULT)

"Doubt thou the stars are fire, Doubt that the sun doth move. Doubt truth to be a liar, But never doubt I love."
-William Shakespeare

Melina watched her Lord look around for another vict- another participant in his newest scheme.

She ignored the Phoenix's desire to approach and be the one Mikael targeted. Her time with the man told her that when he was in one of these moods, she'd end up swept along at his pace if she approached.

As far as eccentricities went, this one was more harmless than most.

In celebration of this 'Christmas,' a festival her Lord was using as an excuse to keep everyone home and together for the day, Mikael had donned a cap to which a branch was affixed. At the end of the branch was a bushel of small fruit.

Melina didn't know why those who stood under this 'Mistletoe' were to kiss, but her Lord took great delight in chasing down his various wives with his ridiculous hat and covering them with affection.

Melina watched her Lord turn himself invisible to the eye. The combination of spells and miracles that had allowed him to lay Starscourge Radhan low was now being used to appear behind Robin, reappear to give her a long kiss, and then disappear again with a mischievous giggle as the former pirate tried to steady her suddenly shaky legs. Tsunade, who had been talking to the brunette, just smirked.

Once more, the Pheonix Force's desires welled up, and Melina fed the burning jealousy the force of nature felt to her inner fire with the ease of long practice.

It was much easier now than when she first started to distinguish what emotions were being magnified by the psychic entity.

The Pheonix Force knew that any jealousy would be counterproductive to its desire to become one with Life- with Mikael, but it couldn't help it. It was like a child with its emotions, knowing their outbursts were wrong but unable to control them properly due to how new they were.

It wasn't that its emotions were wrong, so Melina couldn't fault it. For one, the Phoenix Force could only magnify what was already there, unable to create emotions out of nothing.

And there was a portion of Melina, the one that had been Mikael's sole romantic interest for over a decade of travel, that did feel jealousy every time she saw him lay his

affection upon the other women of the Family. But Melina knew she wasn't alone in that feeling of jealousy. Baring Yoruichi, Scathach, and Emma, everyone in the Family felt a desire to monopolize Mikael's attention, to one degree or another.

The Phoenix Force needed to learn that, while emotions could be beautiful, momentary satisfaction did not mean the greatest happiness in the long run.

The Family was not exempt from the darker emotions others faced. They just choose to come together, put aside jealousy and envy, and keep the Family whole and together.

A sacrifice of momentary pleasures for long-term happiness.

Within Melina, the Phoenix Force calmed.

Just in time, too, as Mikael decided his next target would be Pride, who was trying to play a fighting game with Priscilla. 'Trying' because the demon lord was not very good. But, as each loss affected her pride, Raven's demonic side doubled down and rechallenged the crossbreed.

Or she would have if Mikael hadn't decided to take Pride's most recent loss as the perfect opportunity to tackle the demon to the couch, kiss her thoroughly, and then disappear in a flash of teleportation.

Raven reabsorbed her clone with a smirk before the demon lord could go dragon hunting.

And get a spanking for her trouble.

"Have you decided who you shall give your spot to tonight?" Glynda asked, handing Melina a cup of an off-white viscous liquid of some sort as they both watched Mikael reappear in the air above Scathach.

The Lancer seemed to expect it, and she twisted her body away. Undeterred, Mikael turned his fall into a roll, and a chase around the room ensued as her Lord attempted to entrap the woman and seize her lips while the Queen of Shadows did her best to evade.

Cheers and jeers filled the room as the other women watched, either egging Mikael on or trying to trip him up as he and Scathach jumped, flipped, slid, and bounced around the room while barely touching anything or anyone.

"I have not," Melina answered, sipping the drink.

It tasted decent, even if a bit too thick in texture for her palette, like drinking stew. It clung oddly to her tongue and the roof of her mouth.

"Then I'd recommend Artoria," the former huntress said, waving her hand and using her Semblance to move a couch just enough that Mikael tripped. She hid her smirk at his over-exaggerated look of betrayal behind her own drink.

"Not yourself?" Melina asked, taking another sip of the odd drink. The taste was growing on her, but the aftertaste was a bit odd.

To keep things civil, a schedule of sorts was set up on who spent the night with Mikael. It wasn't anything concrete, and not once had the entire two weeks passed without some kind of deal-making, betting, or change of plans leading to disruption in the rotation.

What was odd was that it really was only 'nights' with him.

Anyone in the Family could pull him aside if they were in the mood at pretty much any time, and he did the same, so it wasn't like sex was regulated. They were all too spontaneous for such a thing, and if they tried, it would kill any sort of surprise or romance. Because of the lack of need to sleep, a 'night' was better described as the time set aside for privacy rather than an actual nighttime.

Nights with Mikael had taken on an almost form of currency in the Family. An odd economy and exchange rate had started to form. A full-day date was worth two whole nights, for example. Or two women could pool their time or something other of that nature to extend their time.

The system only really worked because everyone had no problem going against it if a whim seized them, knowing they could pay it back later for others. It also allowed those who were increadibly busy, like Diana, Artoria, and Glynda, to not feel left out even if they were gone from home for weeks. All time they missed could be traded for more time later.

That and Mikael wasn't the only option for sexual partnerships within the Family for many of the women. Yoruichi still spent two or three nights a week in Tsunade's bed or Glynda with Schathach or Diana. Pride was rampantly sexual, trying to sleep with every member of the Family, to mixed success, in some sort of effort to 'establish dominance.'

Sometimes, Melina felt she should try to chart the exact nature of the relationships in this Family to understand it better, but every time she tried, she just got a headache.

For example, Medea was bisexual but would only be with other women if Artoria or Mikael were there as well. Emma was similar, only engaging with someone else with Mikael present or on his explicit orders. Robin, on the other hand, was exclusively interested in Mikael sexually but enjoyed spying on the others when they got together.

Melina had long ago realized why her Lord called it a Family, rather than a harem. Because while he was the catalyst that brought them together and a sort of central nexus of relationships, even if Mikael disappeared, they would all stay together as one Family. A heartbroken family, perhaps, one that might lose a few members, maybe, but they would have each other.

And, slowly, Lady Ranni and Melina were becoming part of this odd Family.

A big, dysfunctional Family of misfits that just happened to have sex.

A lot of sex.

“I owe her a favour for last time,” Glynda explained. “This is the most efficient way of paying her back.”

“What sort of favour?” Mmmmm, would this drink make her breath smell odd? Melina hoped not.

“She gave up her last turn so Diana and I could have ours back to back,” Glynda’s face was a bit red but nowhere near as flush as it had been when she first started experimenting with Diana and Mikael. “We were, um, trying something new. I am merely trying to pay her back.”

Was her Lord’s perversion infectious? It was an interesting thought.

Certainly, Melina had experienced the degeneracy of the man, as well as said and done things she had never imagined under Mikael’s skilled touch.

Whether it was Glynda’s sex dungeon, Yoruichi’s new collar, Diana’s leather cuffs hidden under her bracers, or how Robin would sometimes act in ways that hinted at using her powers for more… indiscreet activities.

Were the Family losing their sense of shame thanks to spending so much time with Mikael? …Perhaps.

“Unfortunately for Artoria, I will not be giving up my place tonight,” Melina said, taking another sip of the curious drink.

“You have enough control now,” Glynda asked, looking over Melina curiously.

“I believe so,” the Kindling Maiden nodded faintly. “My recent efforts with Emma, Lady Ranni, and Scathach in coordinating the infected have been good practice.”

Since becoming the Phoenix Force host and gaining her Element in the process, Melina had been unable to lay with her Lord.

Not for lack of trying, of course.

Merely that the mercurial entity within her, unaccustomed to emotions and physical sensations, tended to respond powerfully to ‘joining’ with Li- Mikael.

Said responses usually involved a copious amount of fire.

This wasn’t a problem, per se, as Mikael was undeterred, and it was not the first time he and his lovers destroyed a room, or three, with their passion. Except as the Phoenix host, Melina was also affected by its excitement.

To put it in her Lord’s words: ‘The Phoenix Force is a quick shot, and every time it cums, it goes supernova, and you pass out.’

While it felt good, more than good, for the Maiden, it provided remarkably less satisfaction to her Lord. She could not even relieve him with her touch, her mouth, or the rest of her body, as the Phoenix’s hypersensitivity would reduce her to a quivering mess.

No matter how he tried to reassure her, it was a shameful failure as her Lord’s

woman.

Not even being able to perform her duties had Melina more determined to gain control than ever, allowing the more qualified woman of the Family to take her 'turn' until she could resume her role as her Lord's Maiden.

Sometimes, Melina regretted becoming the host of the Phoenix Force. It seemed to be more of a hindrance than aid.

Then Mikael would meet her eyes as she practiced, and Melina saw the hope in them.

The hope that she, with the Phoenix Force, could purge the Old Blood from this world.

Mikael was buying time, time for her to master her new power. He was delaying the inevitable long enough until she could burn everything that hurt him from this world.

The Hunt was affecting him. They all could see that.

In the way his bouts of silence were becoming more frequent. In his efforts to deal with the worst outbreaks before they ever learned about them.

But, no matter how low he got, Mikael would never give up, no matter how much Life hurt, because that was who he was.

The least Melina could do was match that effort.

That was what tonight was about, more than anything. A chance to relax and laugh and play, even as the world slowly sank into madness.

Melina watched Mikael catch Scathach with a trap of crystal. The Lancer shattered the confinement instantly, but it gave enough time for her Lord to dangle his absurd headwear over her head.

Under the cultural compulsion of the 'Mistletoe,' the Queen of the Land of Shadows was forced to concede.

Despite the loss, Scathach didn't look in any way put out as she ravished her Lord's mouth in a passionate kiss.

"Congratulations," the former huntress gave the Phoenix host a small smile. "Though, I shall just be down the hall if you need me. I still can't fix anything burned to ashes, though."

"Ideally, we shall not, but I cannot make such a promise," Melina sighed, finishing her drink. It was a bit uncouth, but she smacked her lips lightly to disperse the remnants of the drink. "By the way, what is this concoction?"

"Eggnog."

"How odd. I was unaware that eggs could be turned into such a drink. It is also unlike Mikael to choose such a sweet brew."

"From my understanding, it is a tradition for this holiday. But yes, you are correct.

He's not drinking that. That's the unaltered drink. He, Scathach, and Medea created a more alcoholic version that is less sweet."

"I shall try this other brew then. And…" Here, Melina paused, unsure how to voice her next point.

"Yes?" Glynda prompted.

"Is there a traditional garb for this holiday?" Melina asked, gesturing to the lights and tree. "For tonight, I mean."

Grail Knowledge gave her an overview of what 'Christmas' was and a few cultural notes so she could fit in, but it was not a source of all knowledge.

"I…" Glynda paused, giving the idea some thought. "I do not know. We had celebrations for winter in my home, but it is different here. Maybe Medea has something appropriate."

Melina nodded in agreement with the idea.

Just because nobody here followed the religion this holiday was based on did not mean Melina did not wish to aid her Lord in his efforts to make it an occasion to come together as a Family.

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"Now, this is a nice Christmas present," her Lord said with a raised brow and a smile as he beheld Melina sprawled out on his bed.

Melina was unsurprised by the look of lust in his eyes.

Her Lord was always a deviant of the highest order, constantly craving new and stimulating experiences. More than once in their journey together, he had clad her in various outfits for his pleasure.

It was because she had known his preferences that Melina had asked Glynda, and then Medea, for some manner of clothing that would befit the season that would be appropriate.

This led her to wear a red 'Santa' hat, weirdly similar to those of the wandering merchants, and a large ribbon tied in a manner that covered her breasts and groin.

And nothing else.

"Will the bird brain be a problem," Mikael asked, removing his own headwear.

Then, the rest of his ridiculous outfit. He said it was 'festive.'

Everyone else just appreciated the way his open red shirt framed his abbs.

"I have it under control," Melina said simply, enjoying the sight of her Lord's body for the first time in… too long.

Mikael noticed her attention and, with his customary lack of shame, grinned as he started to slow his disrobing.

Melina rolled her eyes but watched with bated breath as inch after inch of skin was exposed, heat pooling in her loins.

This was the body she had watched slay the greatest of the Demigods.

Those arms had hunted dragons to extinction.

That was the waist she had held for years as they rode across the Lands Between atop Torrent.

That back had given Melina the sole source of safety in her long years.

That was the chest Melina had laid her head against, the hair she had run her fingers through and the lips that had whispered sweet words into her ears.

“Are you sure you can do this,” Mikael asked as he finished his impromptu strip show. “Your hair is on fire.”

“A side effect,” Melina didn’t even blink at the accusation. “The Phoenix needs an outlet. There shall be damage, but I shall fulfill my duties, my Lord.”

Mikael sighed, sitting on the bed beside her. Then he pulled her into a hug, and they fell back against the mattress.

His touch alone sent shivers down Melina’s spine, but she fed those feelings to the flame in her core. The Phoenix was to be an aid, not a hindrance.

“You know there’s nothing wrong with taking more time, right? I’m in no rush. I won’t think any less of you.”

Indeed, for all his lechery, her Lord would only inflict it upon the willing. Should Melina demonstrate even a hint of unwillingness, he would either try to asway her concern or, failing such, leave her be until such time as she was comfortable.

Such had been the case in Caelid, where the miasma of the Scarlet Rot permeated the air, rendering it a significant detriment to their usual nights of passion.

T’was only in locations free of the affliction that they could become one once more. It led to months without physical contact, as Melina remained in spiritual form as Mikael wandered the land.

Still, this was not such a case, and Melina knew how to assuage her lover’s concern.

“And…” Despite her commitment and the feelings welling up within her, Melina couldn’t help but pause in momentary embarrassment at the words she needed to speak. “It has been too long since I have felt you within me, my Lord.”

Mikael’s sympathetic smile slipped back into the grin of lust.

Only a deviant such as him would enjoy seeing a lady speak in such an uncouth manner.

Amid passion, Melina had no such reservations, but before? Shame welled up in her breast, and that shame further fuelled the pit of longing need within her.

What had this man done to her?

Melina had gone from a woman who had never felt the touch of a man to a wanton degenerate who would beg for sex. All because of the terrible influence of this fiend.

Melina fed the lust that those thoughts brought to her flame as well, lest the room be consumed by the Phoenix's fires.

The psychic entity aided her, trying to channel its own rampant emotions into her core. It desired this even more than Melina. If only the touch of Life was enough to bring it such tremendous pleasure, what would a joining be like?

That was why Melina had such confidence now. The Phoenix was now very aware that Mikael would keep his threat of not touching them if it impeded Melina.

"I've missed you too. Tell you what," Mikael said, trailing a finger along her side. Melina shivered. "We can give it another shot, but if you pass out again, we're waiting till you have full control. I'd rather not fuck an unconscious body."

"If I pass out before you release," Melina countered.

There had been many times her ability to remain conscious had failed because of her own weakness, well before becoming the Phoenix host.

"Deal," Mikael grinned and, with a flick of his wrist, untied his 'present.'

Melina luxuriated in the way his eyes roamed her naked body as the ribbon fell to the bed. She was nowhere near the beauty of the rest of his concerts, but not once had she felt undesired by her Lord.

With the air of a man touching glass that could shatter at any moment, Mikael took her breasts in hand, cupping them gently. His rough thumbs ghosted over her excited nipples gently as he kissed her.

Melina leaned into the kiss, pressing her body against him, urging him to touch her more.

This was where things had started to unravel last time, but seeing as the only effect was Melina's hair glowing brighter, Mikael continued with more surety.

It wasn't that the Phoenix was any less sensitive to his touch than before; it was just that Melina was burning all outside effects away as soon as they came.

Her Lord's lips left Melina's, and she whimpered as he trailed kisses down her chin, along her neck, and to her breasts.

His lips, his touch, and the press of their bodies together were almost overwhelming. Mikael's every touch was like fire, blazing hot for an instant before being doused in her own flames, only to flair again a second later.

It was enough to drive a woman mad, the feel of him thousands of times more potent than Melina remembered. Only her long experience with Fire allowed her to keep her reactions to groans, moans, and whimpers that Melina did her best to muffle.

Mikael took that as a challenge.

And, being the petty and competitive person he was, her Lord redoubled his efforts to draw out her voice.

One of his hands left her breasts, trailing downward. It made stops along the way, pressing and squeezing in places he knew Melina to be most sensitive.

Here, he grasped her lower side, where she was usually ticklish. There, he pressed below her navel, on the point right above her womb. Then, he ran a fingernail along the inside of her thighs, sending her shivering and clenching.

Mikael was a fire, all-consuming, all-devouring in its hunger for her.

No part of her body had not experienced his touch before, not been trained to respond, and he knew it. He turned that knowledge, gained over a decade together, all for the purpose of answering Melina's unspoken challenge.

As Melina knew he would.

Just as Mikael knew her own body better than she did, playing it like an instrument in the hands of a master bard, so too did Melina know how to engage her Lord and bring him pleasure.

To Mikael, sex was as much a mental challenge as it was a physical one. He was endlessly creative and experimental, constantly trying new ideas and positions.

All in favour of his greatest fetish: his partner's pleasure.

Early on, Melina had considered it romantic. Now, after truly knowing her Lord, she understood that it stemmed not from kindness or romance but rather from Mikael's unique form of egotism.

Mikael worked incredibly hard to ensure he was the best lover possible because he needed to be the best. Out of sentimentality, pride, jealousy, kindness, and inferiority.

Egotism, where there was only one person you could control, and thus only one person you could blame.

It was in these moments, when Mikael tried his best to bring his partner to pleasure through any method he could imagine, did Melina glips below the first layer of Mikael's mask.

Below the cocky assurance, the laughter and puns, the arrogance and showy displays, was the fragile layer. The coward who feared death. The man bursting with inferiority that did everything he could so he would not be forgotten.

Underneath the battered armour of bombastic extroversion was the frightened

introvert. The man who craved solitude yet couldn't stand to be alone. Who, in the dark of night when they were alone together under the stars, had confessed his deepest fears and showed Melina his most pathetic side.

Seeing her quiver and give in under his touch brought such a pure smile to that man's face that Melina felt her release.

That damned smile. The smile that was entirely too self-satisfied. A smile born from seeing the pleasure he could bring. In the affirmation of his worth, in his existence, through others.

Egotism born from the lack of ego.

Superiority born from a sense of inferiority.

Sadism born from pain.

As Mikael brought Melina to her first orgasm of the night, he could not know that it was as much to see his pleasure as it was from his touch.

Melina was Fire. She was born for Fire, been shaped by Fire, and had returned to Fire.

But she was never the Fire born to destroy, but the Fire that warmed and comforted.

And the man before her, the one who had kindled that fire in her breast, who had nurtured it and fed it, who had shaped it with every touch and directed it with every word, was who Melina burned for.

Mikael found joy in bringing Melina to the cliff's edge of pleasure and pushing her over.

Melina's greatest pleasure was grabbing his hand to see his smile as she dove willingly into the abyss as they fell together.

Fire with purpose.

For the first time since their union, the Phoenix and host were in perfect sync.

They needed this. They needed Mikael. They needed to peel back every layer of sediment, every armour and defence he had erected, to lay him bare of all that the cruel world had forced him to wear and reach his core.

They needed to become one with him in the only way he would allow.

"Woah," Mikael said with a grin as he allowed himself to be pushed onto his back and Melina to straddle his waist. "Someone's pent up."

He had no idea.

He couldn't.

Mikael had given them Purpose.

Mikale had given them Life.

They rubbed themselves back and forth along his member. They were already wet enough, but they had learned in their decades with the man that there was no such thing

as too prepared.

Eventually, when his erection was slick with their arousal, they lifted their hips and lined his tip up with their entrance.

“Wait!” Mikael ordered, and they froze.

Had they done something wrong? This was their first time; they didn’t want to disappoint him. Already, they had failed their duties for weeks. They didn’t know what they would do if they also failed here.

They should have known their Lord/Life would not deny them.

Mikael placed the red hat on their head, moving the white pompom so it was behind their head and lay back down with his arms crossed behind his head.

“Continue,” Mikael ordered with a smirk.

They knew what these actions truly meant under his arrogant facade.

Mikael could not be passive. He could not simply receive pleasure.

He needed to contribute somehow, to be in charge even from the bottom, because if he wasn’t if he didn’t have input, there would be no difference between him and some other man.

It was so ridiculous, so pathetic, so sincere, so domineering, so *Mikael* that they could not wait even a moment longer.

Their waist lowered, their lower lips parted, and he was in.

They were one.

Unable to feed everything to their core, for there was just too much sensation, firey wings burst from their back.

Their Lord/Life watched them with concern, but they met his gaze with one alight with flames.

They were awake. They were still in control of themselves.

He nodded.

They lowered themselves down completely, filling themselves with him until he kissed their most sacred of places, and the wings grew.

It was so much feeling. Too much. They felt like they were going to burst.

Mikael was the only one they had ever been with, so they had no comparison, but he must be on the larger side, they were sure. If not, they feared for those who tried to take in more. Surely, they would burst.

They sat there, connected to their Lord/Life in the second most intimate way possible, wishing they could become even closer, yet knowing it wasn’t possible.

Yet.

Then they began to move, raising their waist slowly, for that was all they could do. It

was a struggle, for every movement widened the void within them, yearning to once more feel him, but they knew it was for his pleasure and theirs, so they continued until only his tip nestled within their warmth. Where it belonged.

The wait was too much, and they crashed back down, filling themselves again. Stuffed full, they luxuriated in the feeling, now knowing the emptiness they had been missing their entire lives.

It took all the effort and will they possessed to do it again. Then again. And again. Again. Again.

Over and over, the void grew only to be filled once more.

Pleasure, like none they had ever felt before, overwhelmed them with even the slightest movement.

Pleasure of the flesh, that rippled and squeezed.

Pleasure of the heart, at the look of rapture on his face.

Pleasure of the mind, as they felt his thoughts swirl around them.

Pleasure of Fire, of the heat of his body and of the heat of their core.

So much pleasure that it was less that they were having repeated orgasms and more that they were having one continuous release that never ended.

And then their Lord/Life gave up his passivity to fuel the blaze.

Once more, his burning touch left scars of heat along their skin as he sought to bring even more joy.

He sought to tease a reaction from them, to hear them sing.

And they sang.

Moans that echoed with bird song.

Cries that trilled.

Chirping whimpers.

A cacophony of sounds that were so alien and yet so human that any who heard them would swear, to their dying day, that it was the most beautiful music they had ever heard.

He knew the pyre, this body, better than any other. He had cultivated these flames until they were the inferno they were now.

Under Mikael's touch, they were at once his goddess and his slave.

For them, there was nothing he would not do.

For him, they would burn everything to ash.

Together, they would transcend even Death.

Their Lord/Life released, adding another wonderful source of heat to their core.

They Burned Together.

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In the remains of what was once the master bedroom, lying in the ashes of a once great bed, they gathered their breath.

Gone was her sense of unity with her passenger. In its place was a sense of contentment from the force of nature that Melina had never felt before.

She definitely still needed practice in control, though.

"Congratulations," Melina snarked, laying her head on her Lord's chest. "That was the Phoenix Force's first time, and you blew its mind."

Mikael snorted at the pun, just as she knew he would.

"I'm sure it's had hosts that had sex before," Mikael denied with a chortle, pulling her closer and giving her butt a playful swipe.

The Phoenix Force's presence within her stirred once more at the sensation.

"It has," Melina acknowledged as her hair again glowed with dancing flame. "But not once was it entirely one with its host during it. It watched instead of participating. Not this time. So... Congratulations, you took the Phoenix Force's virginity."

Mikael laughed at the absurdity of that statement but was more than happy to help the 'virgin' explore sensations it had never truly experienced before.

Author's Note:

Tried a few things differently this time, as you can tell. Female perspective, for one. Also, after the last chapter, I deliberately tried to frame things in a less lewd light. This led to more metaphors and allusions rather than straight perversion. This is aided by the fact that Melina is nowhere near the degenerate that Yoruichi is.

I also tried to keep things in line with how I imagine Melina sees the world, Mikael, and their relationship. Keeping her 'voice' was important. The Phoenix Force is always an interesting challenge to write, too, because its 'character' is so malleable.

I hope you all had either a great Valentine's Day or Single Awareness Day. Either way, this will be the last Side Story, and we are back to the main story, right to the end. I will see you all next week.

DREAM V

“Life is a song - sing it. Life is a game - play it. Life is a challenge - meet it. Life is a dream - realize it. Life is a sacrifice - offer it. Life is love - enjoy it.”
-Sai Baba

Darkness.

2018 ended in darkness, in terror and in madness.

Some celebrated the New Year in their usual fashion. With friends, family, and a cheer as the clock struck midnight.

They had done it.

Once more, they had survived another year. Something that was never guaranteed in a world where villains attacked weekly, and disasters happened monthly.

And 2018 had been worse than most.

Natural disasters. Villain attacks. Two regular Endbringer battles. Heartbreak.

It was a long year, yet they were still there.

Others did not celebrate at all.

The New Year was not a reprieve but a continuation of the world’s struggle.

Just another day on a planet where its most powerful heroes were gone, where a blood-borne plague ravished the planet, and a continent-sized dragon and its Family were globally recognized villains. Yet, the world was helpless to stop any of it.

Billions of people had been cured of the Beast plague as they followed the Grace of the Moon into darkness, only to emerge on the other side healed and plague-free.

Yet the plague was nowhere near eradicated.

It only took one drop in a town’s water to reinfect everyone once more. There seemed to be no end to those who craved power, blood, or violence.

Villains using the blood for their schemes. The power-hungry using it for politics. Those with more curiosity than sense tried to delve into its secrets. Those who chose ignorance, simply refusing to be healed, refusing to believe there was a problem, as they didn’t see any effect on their daily life.

A hundred reasons with one result, and the world suffered for it.

Give a human a weapon, and they shall kill their enemies.

Give humanity a weapon, and they shall kill themselves.

Blood and madness were no cause for celebration.

For many, New Year’s Eve was just another dark day.

Yet still, in the darkest of times, there is always joy to be found for those who look for

the light.

On that dark and cold New Year's night, a spotlight shining down on a stage was just that light.

In an enormous stadium constructed outside Metropolis, over a hundred and fifty thousand people watched that light with bated breath.

They weren't cold. Magic heated the air around Frost Stadium even as its roof remained open to the winter sky.

They weren't scared. Heroes attended, even in an event hosted by 'villains.'

They weren't alone. Much of humanity watched that light in the darkness with them. Hundreds of millions of people watched that light from their homes worldwide, on television or the internet.

Bathed by that light in the darkness, Priscilla sang the first note of a Nameless Song.

In those first moments, there was no music, just her voice echoing through the night.

She needed no speaker. No microphone. There were no giant screens or bright lights.

Yet everyone heard.

Just a woman singing her heart out.

Then the music came.

Ciara, the Faerie Queen, strummed her harp in accompaniment. Her light was dimmer, a candle to a bonfire, but no less radiant. The spirit's eyes were closed, a serene smile on her face.

Death had been kind to the former villainess.

The bogeyman of the Super world lost herself in the music as her fingers danced across the strings.

Other instruments joined from the dark, their own flickering embers joining the fire to light it brighter and brighter.

The music swelled and fell, lifting the listeners with gentle hands as they lost themselves in its beauty and Priscilla's voice.

There were no lyrics, no catchy tune or captivating beats.

It was just music.

It was just a melody that welcomed people without care for views, tastes, language or culture.

It was a home to return to.

It was a safe haven from the beasts outside.

It was a Bonefire in the dark, and all were welcomed in that warm light.

The song did not ignore the dark.

Melancholy filled those who listened to it. A sense of loss, of grim, bittersweet

acknowledgement of the true state of the world.

Yet, it was because it knew the dark that it could embrace the light.

Despite the melancholy, the loss of which Priscilla sang without words, it was but the fall before the rise.

More sweet than bitter, more joy than sadness, more light than dark, yet ignoring neither.

Hope amidst despair.

But nobody could carry hope alone.

Priscillia's voice faded.

Before even an instant of silence could pass, the notes of a violin rose from the darkness.

The player, under no spotlight, continued the melody.

They carried the burden Priscilla had set down for the moment, a sombre sadness at her loss, yet a determination to not lose the light she represented.

Priscilla was tired, but that was all right. She could rest for the moment. They would continue to reach out as long as she needed.

It was as if it was calling out to Priscilla, to the world, that they were not alone. That though they might not see others, they were there.

They were together.

A quiet, pleading note. At once, salvation and a curse.

Don't you dare go hollow.

Not a warning or an order.

An expression of care for another in the same circumstances and a reminder for the one saying it to do the same.

So please, friend beyond the dark. Faceless, nameless companion who I will never see and never meet.

Please.

Don't you dare go hollow.

Priscilla rejoined, not with her voice but with a cello. Her five-meter frame, almost fifteen feet tall, nearly turned the large instrument into a violin of her own.

Not a word was spoken between Priscilla and the hidden player, yet an entire dialogue passed between them. Their instruments and their music told each other all that needed to be said.

They played together, lost in their own world, as their strings hummed with a perfect harmony.

Eventually, the hidden violinist receded back into the dark. Nameless and unknown.

Priscilla took up the vocals once more, her voice lighter and more beautiful than ever, rising high, only to fall silent again. Once more, she was alone.

Ciara's harp continued to strum in that void, in that silence.

And, from the darkness, the Nameless violin returned.

The music trailed softly as, for the final time, Priscilla's cello joined the harp and violin for a last few seconds of bittersweet music.

Then silence.

A heartbeat.

Priscilla, a lone light in the dark, sang once more without music.

The song ended not with a low note or a conclusion but with her voice hanging high.

Unresolved.

Because there was no end to the dark.

Because there would always be light.

They just had to find it.

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I rejoined the private booth as the stadium erupted into applause.

A bit delayed, about five seconds after the song was over, but that was to be expected considering how it ended.

I clapped with everyone, smiling widely as Priscilla stood on the now-lit stage with Ciara, Grundy, and the musicians Frost had provided for the concert.

I made a big show of leaning out of the booth, making sure other audience members caught sight of me as the stadium brightened with Medea's magical lights.

I inwardly smirked as many looked on in surprise at my presence.

Sure, most had rightly assumed I was the unknown musician, but the entire point of the song was that it could be anyone. Even if people strongly suspected who I was, I reinforced the message by leaving that space open for possibilities.

Even if it wasn't the Elden Lord, someone was always out there, in the dark, going through what you were.

Priscilla started her next song, the theatre/stadium lighting up brightly thanks to Medea's magic and a large phantasmal projection of Priscilla hovering in the sky so that even those furthest away could see clearly.

I retook my seat beside Ranni, pulling her closer to watch the show as Priscilla sang in the hours leading to the New Year.

Melina also cuddled up against me, hair only glowing a soft red despite the touch. She

was getting better with her control. Hopefully, we'd have the Beast Plague thoroughly purged in a few months.

"T'was beautiful, Lord Husband," the Goddess of the Chill Moon told me softly.

Ranni wasn't being particularly emotive, though this was her real body, because of the other occupants of the booth, but one of her hands found mine and squeezed it.

"Thanks, Doll," I smiled down at her and pecked her on the forehead. Her cheeks flushed a darker shade of blue, but she didn't fight it.

"It really was," Frost said with a smile as she stood next to our little loveseat, a tablet in her hands. "What song was that?"

"A Nameless Song," I answered simply, shooting her a questioning look. "You don't know the song list? You funded this whole show."

"I have been remarkably busy," Frost said with a casual shrug of her shoulders. "Not only in getting this stadium built in time for tonight, but also organizing the various channels that will broadcast it, the charities for the proceeds, and the public relations regarding promoting it. In the last week, I have been on four talk shows, held two press conferences, and been interviewed six times. I have not seen any rehearsals, nor am I familiar with music."

"Then I'll let you watch the show and enjoy the surprise," I smiled back, pretending I wasn't noticing how she looked at me.

Still, Frost was working hard for Priscilla's and my sake, and she had been increadibly helpful so far, despite the hiccup last time, so I wasn't above giving her some rewards.

"Thank you for everything, Emma," I said softly, calling her by her first name for the first time. "And Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year," Frost responded, her smile wider and more genuine. Rather than push for more, as I had half expected, the mutant rejoined her 'bodyguard,' the White Queen, in their own seats.

I got some amused and exasperated looks from the other guests in the booth with us.

"The Boss is too smooth," Victoria 'whispered' to her sister. "You should take notes, Ames."

"I am perfectly happy where I am, thanks," Amelia deadpanned. "I don't need to seduce everything with a pair of breasts on two legs."

"Well said," Artemisia rewarded her date with a kiss that had Amelia grinning foolishly.

"I need a date," Victoria crossed her arms as she pouted.

More than a few of the Amazons perked up, looking at the blonde with appreciative eyes. They weren't the only ones.

Both Chris and Garfield looked like they were in heaven and hell. They were surrounded by beautiful women. Beautiful, fit women.

Beautiful, fit women who were famous for not liking men.

I didn't bother repressing a grin as I once more caught them staring at one of the Amazons in the booth with us, realize they were doing it, and look away… Only to catch sight of another woman wearing clothes that were appropriate for a very warm climate, millennia without men, and a complete ambivalence to the unfairer sex.

Kudos to the pair; they weren't bothering any of the women, keeping a respectful distance as they sat with the rest of the Titans on the booth's far side.

Whether that was because they didn't think Amazons were the best targets for flirtation, because they were afraid of the women who might be able to bench press their entire headquarters, or because Glynda was with them, I didn't know.

But it was damn funny, no matter the reason.

The other Titans didn't really have the same issues.

Mini-Raven sat with My-Raven in the far corner, talking in low whispers. Occasionally, Starfire would join them as she flitted between the two goths and her boyfriend. Dick, looking to be back in shape, was talking with Glynda while Hippolyta conversed with Donna, Laura, and Cessily.

The other Amazons were either clumping together, looking around the stadium in wonder, talking with Wonder Woman, who they hadn't seen in a few weeks, or remaining in their seats and enjoying the show. A few were being 'interviewed' by Lois Lane, who could not control the journalist in her when surrounded by such an opportunity.

I had invited the woman personally since there was still no luck finding her husband. Lois had been a bit suspicious, but when Wonder Woman confirmed she would also be there, she had agreed to attend.

The Boy in Blue had been a pal, on top of being Diana's friend, so I had wanted to check up on his wife and their son. As far as I could tell, her pregnancy was proceeding without issues, and I had ensured they were plague-free.

The 'booth' was pretty big, holding all of us easily, and a late dinner was laid out in the back for those who found themselves hungry.

Only a few of my wives had joined us tonight, Tsunade and Yoruichi watching from home together, while Pride, Scathach, Artoria, and Diana kept up with the hero and plague duties.

Medea was partially in charge of special effects, while Robin was on security, with aid from the witch's bounded field. We couldn't do anything too extensive, not with this number of guests, but more than a few party crashers needed to be dealt with.

Either the Lawful-Stupid type, who still tried to pull something because we were ‘villains’ or the Evil-Stupid type, who were just evil. And stupid.

Ah, well. That would come later. For now, I’d just enjoy the night, the music, and the little surprise I had planned.

I was mainly people-watching, having seen and participated in dozens of Priscilla’s rehearsals and having helped her pick out which songs to sing.

In usual circumstances, I don’t think my fluffy dragon’s first concert would be anywhere near this filled. Not only had Priscilla yet to release a hit song, but she also didn’t really focus on music that was popular in the modern world.

She didn’t hate genres like pop, rap, country, or the like, but music was an increadibly subjective experience. What touches one person deeply, others could not connect to at all.

Priscilla’s experience was increadibly different from what everyone else on Earth went through, so her singing about a breakup, money, or fame wouldn’t work.

She simply couldn’t connect to music like that, and even if she sang ‘popular’ songs, she would not be able to put as much emotion into them as she could with those that resonated with her. More than that, she didn’t want to sing songs that didn’t make her feel anything.

Thankfully, my library had no end of music of all sorts. Every song ever put to paper, leather, papyrus, velum, Microsoft Word, or any other medium could be found there, from ancient Tibetan chants to songs from lost languages to the most obscure YouTube originals.

When choosing the song list, we largely stuck to those in English, just for the widest understandability. From there, we found those that spoke Priscilla and she wanted to sing. Finally, we made sure the songs were not already in this reality.

Even with all those qualifiers, Priscilla still had a song list that was in the hundreds.

While much of this world lined up similarly to my home in terms of culture, there were obvious gaps. Movies or shows that were never made. Singers or songwriters that died because of a villain or Endbringer attack. Or simply choose another career path for some reason.

For example, this world had Star Wars but no Star Trek. I found it baffling since the latter was a part of the inspiration for the former. Even things like cell phones, partly inspired by the communicator from Star Trek, were still here.

Instead, they were invented by Reed Richards as a way to communicate with Earth while in space. That tech was dumbed down, reverse-engineered, and sold to the public as the first smartphones.

The differences were both a blessing and a curse since I sometimes made jokes that

flew over people's heads. Still, it also gave Priscilla a massive log of songs to choose from that were original since neither of us had any songwriting ability.

Well… there was one exception.

That novelty, as well as Prisicilla's beautiful appearance, internet fame, the rarity of a Super being an entertainer, my own efforts to aid her, and Frost's marketing campaign, ensured that Prisiclla's debut was as grand as possible, despite the lack of pandering to popular genres.

After tonight, all the success or failure would depend on her own efforts.

As we had watched, time ticking by towards the New Year, interspersed with the occasional conversation, I eventually spoke as a particular song neared its end.

"Quiet."

All talking in the booth instantly ceased, all eyes on me as I demanded silence. Most had already been listening to the show, only talking in the breaks and lulls, but I didn't want any interruptions for this next part.

As everyone watched, I pulled Ranni to her feet and forward so we had a better look at the stage.

"My Lord?" Ranni asked curiously, not knowing what was going on.

Even my other wives looked on in curiosity, wondering what I was going to pull now, to say nothing of my other guests.

"Doll. Ranni," I told her, ignoring all the watching gazes. "Words cannot express how much you've helped me. Both… before and now." I shot a look at Melina but turned back to the blue eyes of My Goddess. "Whenever I've needed you, when I've been at my lowest, you've been there for me. I've thanked you, but it's not enough, not for any of you. I know how much using your Order means to you, no matter what you say. So, Priscilla and I set up a little something. As a thanks for your Grace."

Ranni looked like she would argue, likely something about her 'duty to her Lord Husband,' but the music started, so she just gave me a look as she turned to watch Priscilla and her band play.

Whether it was Grundy on the drums, Ciara's more modern guitar, or the rest of the musicians' absolute focus on their instruments, I could tell everyone was giving it their all. This was the one song, baring the opening, that they had practiced the most, knowing that they couldn't afford to mess this up.

Like the Nameless song, the tune was melancholic, but there was definitely a lighter tone to it, despite being even more bittersweet.

Ranni listened, curious but not understanding.

Then Priscilla started to sing once more.

“Even if it’s not forever,
We’ve together tread this path so far.
Wary of the will that made me,
Still you leave your trust within my scars,
Winter born and forged strong,
Searching for centuries long,
Built for a dream like ours.”

At first, Ranni’s brows furrowed, and I could tell she was trying to piece together why this song would be a gift to her. Still, she must have been forming some ideas.

The chorus put any thought to the wayside.

“Keep holding on for me, I’ll lift you as I break,
Torn to the smallest piece, half-dreaming, half-awake.
Take my conflicted hands, my heart will light your way,
Know me for what I am, half wolf and half afraid.”

Blue eyes widened.

A pair of blue hands covered her mouth while another two held on to the railing for dear life.

All pretense of decorum and stoicism fled as tears beaded her eyes.

Priscilla sang her heart out, her voice enchanting in its effervescent yearning.

To those who didn’t know the truth and didn’t know what the song meant, it probably sounded like a love song.

It was a bittersweet tale from a half-beast who did their best to control their inner monster to help the one they loved. They failed, they gave in to fear, and they ran. They lost themselves.

The beast won.

But they never forgot, never truly gave in. Even at their lowest, they refused to turn against the one they loved.

So they begged to be remembered, not as the beast they became, but as the person they were before.

A bittersweet tale of love and loss.

The uninitiated might think Priscilla was the ‘half-wolf’ due to her nature as a Crossbreed. Or they could think I was if they remembered my interview with Daily Planet and thought of our ‘fairy tale’ love story.

Either way, anybody with ears could hear the emotion in the singer’s voice. The raw,

unadulterated yearning and steadfast loyalty.

It was a good song. Not super catchy or an earworm that got stuck in your head. It probably wouldn't top any charts, relegated to a niche favourite for Priscilla's more dedicated fans, but that's it.

To those just listening and enjoying the music, it was good but lacked the qualities needed to be one of the greats.

"Keep holding on for me, I'll lift you as I break,
Torn to the smallest piece, half-dreaming, half-awake.
Carry on for the cause, spread light across these shores,
Remember who I was, half-wolf, forever yours."

To those who knew the truth, knew of Ranni's shadow and companion of millennia, the song had a whole different meaning.

To the four of us, Priscilla, Melina, Ranni, and me, the song was one of the greatest we had ever heard.

Not because of the song but because of the man it represented.

I hope somewhere, in the vastness of the multiverse, someone else wrote a song similar to this.

Blaidd deserved it.

"Half-wolf, forever yours,
You know I'm not afraid,
Half-wolf, forever yours."

A eulogy for the most loyal of hounds, who, even now, worlds away, stood guard over his master's last and most precious family.

Never before, or since, had I seen such a perfect example of loyalty than Blaidd.

He, a creation of the Greater Will, had defied the Eldritch being who created him out of love for his companion.

"Hold on, it gets better,
It's here at the end, we turn it all around,
Keep faith, I'm still with you,
We all need a friend to watch the world die out."

People like Blaidd reminded me why I had fallen in love with Dark Souls.

The beauty that could be found in sorrow.

The companionship amidst suffering.

Even when the world ends, we should never forget those with us.

Priscilla wanted this show, this music, to mean to others what my singing had meant to her in a small painted world so long ago.

And, as the music trailed off, an illusionary moon rose above the illusion of Priscilla in the sky.

Upon that moon was a shadow.

A half-wolf looking down at the stadium. It crouched in the classic 'Berserk' pose so reminiscent of Artorias, its massive greatsword held in one hand over its shoulder.

Like I had seen him that first time in Limgrave's forest, he stood watch.

As if, even now, worlds away, the shadow still stood guard over its master.

Ranni openly wept, and my own eyes were moist as we shared a moment of reminiscence about one of the best men I had ever known.

******

That.

That was what she wanted.

That was what she needed.

The most powerful being on the planet, possibly the universe, held the blue Goddess in His arms as she cried.

Those eyes, full of love and unshed tears.

She needed those on her. To look at her like that.

She needed to be one of those Chosen few for whom He would do this.

She needed to be a woman He would stare down heroes for.

She needed to be a woman He would hunt a demon lord for.

She needed to be a woman for whom He would turn the world into a stage.

All so He could remind her that she was loved. And His.

She needed that Love.

More than power, money, food, water, or air, she needed that Mad Love.

Emma Frost would have that.

"Damn," Glory Girl said lowly in the silence that fell between songs. "I take it back, Ames. No way can you be that smooth."

"…Yeah," Panacea answered just as quietly. Even she was affected by the mood. "Still gay, but damn if he doesn't make even me want to try hardwood over carpet. Just for the benefits."

Then the healer looked at her date as if afraid her words would make the Amazon jealous.

She needn't have bothered as Artemisia shot her a smirk.

Almost to a woman, every single one of the Amazons looked at the Elden Lord with mixed emotions.

Some of it was admiration, impressed that the closest thing they still had to a god would do something like that for his wives.

Some of it was surprise. Through their minds, Frost saw that many viewed Mikael with more fear than respect. He had killed their old god, after all. Seeing this side of him was alien, and they were trying to fit the new information with the monster they knew him to be.

Others were already thinking of imitating him.

Most of the Amazons had lived for centuries and had picked up an instrument or two over that time. Using music to woo a prospective lover was nothing new, but many now realized there were entire genres they hadn't heard before that they could use.

Artemisia, for example, was planning on asking Mikael and Priscilla for tips on a modern song that would evoke a similar reaction from the healer, as she intended to keep their relationship going in the long term.

A few, however, had more unique reactions.

The priestess, Penelope, just accepted everything readily, mentally praising her new god. Of course, his ability to woo his women would be superior to others.

For a reason Frost couldn't understand, Penelope also started trying to use musical words to make puns in her mind.

The Amazonian queen… The mutant couldn't really see into her mind well. More than likely, she had developed mental shields of her own during her time as Wonder Woman. All Emma could feel was a deep yearning coming from the woman. Yearning for what, she didn't know.

Nor could she read the younger Raven's mind, but the looks of envy she shot her older self, who looked entirely too smug, were not hard to understand.

Starfire just appreciated the music, Nightwing was trying to parse what the song and image meant, Mercury lost herself in the romance of it, and Beast Boy and Winman were legitimately taking notes.

X-23 was utterly lost, but Frost didn't expect anything different from a wild animal like her.

"Right?" The blonde tart was all smiles and cheer as a new song started, one that brought the mood back up. "I tell you what, I was kind of iffy about the whole 'harem'

thing, but it wasn't any of my business, ya know? But I get it now. The Boss is just a sap. Hopeless romantic. Total pushover. I don't think he could reject them if he wanted to."

The brat didn't get it at all.

She was so close to everything Frost wanted and didn't understand anything. Victoria was the luckiest girl on the planet, and she was wasting her opportunity.

Frost had to work her ass off for months just to get a few words of acknowledgement while she talked to Him so easily.

The brat could come and go from Paradise whenever she wanted, but Frost had to infect herself with a plague and fly to some backwater to teleport to the middle of the ocean just so she could touch one of His scales and feel His power.

All because the bitch had a slightly useful sister.

Emma Frost was vindicated when she noticed her 'bodyguard' was just as incensed. Her counterpart's fists were clenched as she glared at the biggest waste of a girl in the world.

There were times when Frost didn't believe her counterpart was really a version of herself. When she did or said something that went against everything Frost valued. It was only in these occasional moments of synchronicity that Frost knew that she and her fellow White Queen were truly one and the same.

Only one was Chosen, and the other wasn't.

Yet.

Emma Frost let out a little exhale, her inner turmoil not showing the least on her face.

Yet. She wasn't Chosen yet.

But she would be.

So long as she was patient and useful, her sincerity would win Him over.

Her counterpart had confided it took years for them to win His attention, and Emma Frost could wait a few years if it meant gaining eternity.

For now, she'd content herself with the occasional trips to His body to be purified by His power.

She'd have that Mad Love if it was the last thing she did.

******

'Are you sure you want to do this?' Sir Bard asked, for the dozenth time, in her mind. 'We can stop them now. Nobody needs to know, and you can finish the show without issue.'

'I wish to be of aid,' Priscilla responded once more once Ciara took up a beat and she

had a moment to communicate back.

While she appreciated his concern, Sir Bard was already so burdened, and she wished to take up a part of the burden.

No more would she be the Crossbreed locked away in Ariamis' Painted World.

No more would she remain confined to the Island, a damsel waiting for her family to return.

Even Sir Bard had praised her for this plan as he cautioned against it.

'It just doesn't have to be this way,' he tried to persuade her. 'No need to risk it here.'

'T'was thee who decided not to stream Bloodborne. This is but another way for me to raise awareness.'

Her husband remained silent, and Priscilla knew he wouldn't argue anymore.

She had been meticulous to ensure none of her words were an order, as she wished never to use her power over him if possible. Despite that, his promise to support their dreams still held him firm.

Even if there were more efficient ways to accomplish a goal, it was the best way for Priscilla to be of use, and this way, they could leverage all the eyes watching her show.

She had no craving for fame, but if fame would help her Family, she'd use it.

The Crossbreed was overwhelmed with gratitude to her Family and her husband for all they had done to support her dream.

Thanks to them, she could convey a small part of her music to this world, to give them a small taste of the beauty it had brought her when she was at her lowest.

But Priscilla knew that all light needed to be defended.

And for that, they needed more than beauty.

They needed strength.

If she could turn this curse, this blighted existence, into a blade to cut away the dark, Priscilla would.

Her scythe would slay all who dared to harm her new home.

'They're going to attack after the next song,' Lady Robin called through their link.

Priscilla could not answer, focusing on her music and the crowd.

'Not surprised,' Sir Bard sighed. 'It's almost midnight. He's well known for his dramatics. Probably has a speech planned and everything to ring in the new year. Keep Amelia and Victoria here when it starts.'

'With her new modifications, I might have to get rough,' the former pirate cautioned.

'If you have to, do it. But hopefully, she'll calm down once she realizes we've handled it.'

'The heroes?'

‘Same deal. Tell them we’re handling it, and if they try and struggle, work with Glynda. It shouldn’t take too long.’

‘… They’re here. Ten seconds.’

‘For someone who acts so chaotic, he sure is punctual.’

“Will he see my lantern burn on this pitch-black cove tonight?

Will he know my heart beats strong, a beacon of sweet light?

Can he see my frightened eyes?

Can he hear my trembling cries?

And it’s only when he’s near, will I be right.

And it’s only when he’s near, will I be right.”

Priscilla finished the last lyrics of the song and closed her eyes as Ciara played her out.

Deep breath.

One.

Two.

Fuck it.

Four words she had repeated to herself over a dozen times tonight. Before the first spotlight, every time a song ended, and before a new one began.

“HELLLOOOOO METROPOLIS!!”

A pale blue flower burst from the ground, carrying two figures aloft until they stood even higher than the stage.

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!” The Joker yelled into a horn, arm waving in greeting and a massive smile on his white face.

Poison Ivy simply shot the clown a disgusted look before turning her glare to the stage.

To Ciara and Priscilla.

Priscilla couldn’t lose herself in the music now. Her stage fright needed to be put aside.

Now, she needed to fulfill her purpose.

All around the enormous stadium, colossal flowers burst from the ground. Pale blue and white instead of green, they loomed over a crowd of over a hundred thousand who were just starting to realize they were under attack.

‘Huh,’ Sir Bard called in their mind. Priscilla didn’t know how he could sound so casual. If they did this wrong, people could get hurt. Her people. Her fans. ‘Those look like

lumen flowers.'

"I hope nobody minds that we invited ourselves," Joker laughed, spinning in a circle and doing a little dance. "You know I can't resist a good shindig."

'She's been to the Island,' Robin asked in surprise.

"Anyone tries anything, and my babies will cover the entire stadium in poison," Poison Ivy, not interested in the theatrics of the purple-suited clown, was direct with her threat. "If I release them, you die. If I don't keep them restrained, you die. If I die, you die. So nobody do anything… stupid."

'Nah,' Sir Bard responded casually. 'They just look like them. Probably because she has so much of the Old Blood in her. The fact that they're white and blue instead of black and red means Ivy leans more towards Insight than Beasthood. Interesting.'

"But the show must go on!" The Joker called, laughing. "I couldn't let something like this go by without a visit. I've always wanted to get into show business. If only Mama Batsy was here. He'd be so proud." The Clown Prince of Crime faked wiping away a tear.

'While I can appreciate your academic interest,' Glynda called out, a note of strain in her voice. 'Holding back Amelia is becoming quite the chore. Please hurry up. Before she does something… drastic.'

Poison Ivy rode a vine down to the stage, even as the Clown stayed on the larger platform above. As she approached, Priscilla got a better look at the knarled and twisted roots, each glowing a pale blue, as they ran below the villainess's skin.

Like the woman was being puppeted by a tree's roots.

'I'm done,' Robin said. 'The bombs are dealt with, and all their helpers are caught. They're alone now.'

'Priscilla, you ready?'

Deep breath.

She'd succeed.

'Do it.' She turned invisible and pulled her scythe from her bottomless box.

She'd killed one Avatar of the Green before. She could kill another.

'Here we go.'

******

The crowd had panicked when the attack began.

This was the Joker.

A madman with a body count in the thousands who had managed to evade justice despite his crimes.

He might not have any powers of his own, but everybody considered him a threat.

Schools and hospitals blown up. Rapes and tortures. Heroes, fellow villains, and civilians. All victims of the madman.

Attrocity after attrocity. Disaster after disaster. Murder after murder.

The slaying of New Wave in their home, driving Panacea mad in the process, was but one of countless acts of brutality.

Its only difference from so many others was the state the villain had been left in, taking years to recover from the myriad of poisons and diseases the biokinetic had grown in his own stomach, relishing in his slow, painful death.

The Red Queen had been stopped before she could kill him, but not before he had reminded everyone of an old card, one that had hung over everyone's heads the entire time he had been alive.

Mutually assured destruction.

From his first appearance, there had been no low the Joker would not stoop to. No crime he would not commit. No act to vile or depraved.

So, when his infamy was at its peak, and heroes and vigilantes alike had hunted for him, he had kidnapped a news broadcast.

Cackling with laughter from atop a pair of corpses, the Joker had welcomed everyone attempting to take him on.

Not because he thought he'd win against a world of super-powered people out for his blood.

But because even if he lost, he'd win in the end.

A deadman's switch. Killing him would unleash a disaster, ending the lives of tens of thousands of people.

The Red Queen hadn't cared about collateral, just her revenge.

But there was a problem.

Nobody knew if it was real.

Certainly, numerous Joker plots have been stopped over the years. Bombs dismantled. Poisons cured. Biological weapons stopped. But nobody was sure if THE plot was stopped. Whether the deadman's switch was still active or not.

If they, in being the officer to shoot the clown or the vigilante to finally put him down, they would be the victim of an inevitable revenge from beyond the grave.

So, the Joker could only be arrested.

He'd eventually break out again, no matter where he was kept, and then he'd take revenge on whoever put him behind bars.

A vicious cycle with only one winner.

Like his nemesis, the Joker had weaponized fear. A powerless man, with only his mind, unpredictability, and reputation, had become one of the most feared villains in a world of Supers.

It was only because he was obsessed with Batman and his continual residency in Gotham that the rest of the world did not usually have to suffer from the Joker's madness.

But, he did venture out of the cursed city occasionally, and when he did, tragedy would follow his every step.

Like now.

When Poison Ivy approached the Clown Prince of Crime about possibly killing over a hundred thousand people, he leapt at the chance.

He didn't care that the chlorokinetic needed to get rid of a stupid ghost. Nor about the song in the back of his mind egging him on. All he cared about was giving the Elden Lord a black eye.

The Joker would ruin the dragon's little show.

Killing that singer would be an incredible joke on the bastard who had ruined the Joker's magnum opus.

Even if his victims were brought back to life, nobody would be able to escape the fear in their hearts.

The Joker always had the last laugh.

All the song in the back of his head did was remind him to absorb enough infected blood to drown a whale, but that hardly took more than a day.

It was all so perfect.

The fear in the crowd.

The helplessness of the heroes.

The millions and millions of people watching him from their homes, knowing nowhere was safe.

The only way this could be better was if Batman was here front and center. Ah, well, he'd have to settle for taunting the Bat later.

A joke.

That's what this called for.

A nice joke, one that nobody would ever forget.

"Hey!" The Joker suddenly yelled, making thousands of people jump in fright. "Whoever doing the lights, get working already! You missed my cue! Who do I have to shoot to get some respect around here!"

To prove a point, and because it was funny, the Joker pulled out an enormous pistol and fired it randomly into the crowd. The villain didn't care if it hit anyone; they'd all die

soon anyway, but the shouts of surprise and fear were the true music of the night.

Suddenly, the image in the sky shifted from that tall mutant singer to a dazzling portrayal of the Joker's face.

"It's… beautiful," the Joker pantomimed another tear, the face in the sky mirroring his every move.

Ahhh, this was going to be a great year.

His face shifted, a smile stretching to his cheeks.

The Clown Prince of Crime looked down at his helpless victims from above, radiating violence and malevolence.

The crowd shuffled, but nobody screamed.

That wouldn't do.

Sure, he was supposed to be the 'distraction' for the weedkiller to kill the singer, but everyone knew who the real star of the show was.

Couldn't have anyone outperforming him, after all.

"What am I missing? What am I missing?" The Joker paced back and forth on the flower platform. All eyes followed him. "My face in lights. A crowd of adoring fans. It's all here, but I am missing something. Something that everybody needs." The Joker froze mid-step, whirled, and, with a cackling laugh, yelled in triumph. "I know! Fireworks!"

In a moment, he pressed the detonator, sending a tenth of the stands into a firey explosion to ring in the new year.

The sound, the blast, and the fire were cataclysmic. Thousands died. Everyone panicked.

The Joker laughed.

He wasn't the only one.

"Pfffftttttt," the snort of amusement, like someone desperately trying to contain a laugh and failing, pulled the Clown Prince of Crime from his enjoyment of the festivities.

Sitting on a flower petal right beside him was a man in an outfit just as garish as his own but without the class.

The Elden Lord was doubled over, hands over his mouth, as he desperately tried to contain his laughter. When he realized the Joker was looking at him, he stopped trying to hide it and opened his mouth to laugh even harder.

The Joker shot him.

The bullet hit his skull and flattened, not even ruffling Mikael's hair.

"You shot me!" Mikael laughed harder, tears of mirth beading his eyes as he rolled around the flower platform. "You actually tried to shoot me! Oh god, I'm dying. I'm dying. Pfffhhahahahahahaha!"

“Ah well,” he shrugged, still smiling. “If once is funny, twice is funnier.”

The Joker pressed another detonator.

Another stand erupted in fire.

More screams.

The Elden Lord continued to laugh.

“Oh god, man, you might actually kill me from laughter,” the Elden Lord said, still chuckling, as he finally stood.

Then he was right beside the Joker, arm around his shoulder in an almost brotherly way.

“Listen, Joke. Can I call you Joke? Anyway, Joke, listen. I was a bit miffed you crashed my girl’s party, but you more than made up for it with your comedy routine. Pure gold, that’s what this is. Pure gold. What do you think, folks?”

The illusion dissolved.

No more fire. No more rubble. No more screams.

A hundred and fifty thousand pairs of eyes watched the two men on the flower stem.

And there was no fear in them.

Just confusion and… mirth?

“Imagine,” Mikael said with a laugh. “That a feared villain shows up on TV makes a bunch of threats, then starts talking to himself. Pretty scary, right? Now imagine that same scene, but the villain doesn’t notice that all his bombs and weapons are gone, that there is no threat, and that Yakety Sax is playing in the background while he pretends to kill people. It starts to be less scary and a bit more weird, doesn’t it?”

The Joker tried to say something, to get a word in, but even when he spoke, no sound escaped.

“Then imagine that the only real threat, the poisonous plants, suddenly all die. People are confused, of course, but they start to feel a bit safer. Then the guy that ate an Endbringer shows up.”

The villain couldn’t move. He tried, but he couldn’t move. His very shadow pinned him in place.

“See, Joke? It’s juxtaposition comedy. A tiny dog yipping at an elephant. Or, in this case, a clown threatening a dragon. It’s hard to be scared of a clown when you remember the dragon is on your side. And the opposite of fear isn’t hope but laughter. So, it starts to become funny.”

Anything. The Joker tried to do anything at all.

Nothing.

“Look over there, Joke,” Mikael turned the man, his own shadow shifting his legs

until he faced a particular booth. “If you squint reaaallllyyyy hard, you might see something nice. Or not. I understand. You’re an old man. Past your prime. Those old eyes don’t work like they used to.”

An image of the booth projected in front of the two men on the flower. Two young women, hands leaning against a railing as they watch them.

Victoria and Amelia Dallon.

Both were smiling.

It was not a kind smile, but they were alive and smiling.

It was proof that the Joker’s greatest triumph had ended in failure.

In a voice only the Joker could hear, the Elden Lord whispered in his ear.

“We’ve had an eye on you for a week now. Took up Gotham duty as a favour from the Bat. Knew you were planning this and had disabled all your little plans, but I didn’t bother stopping you from attacking tonight. Do you know why Joke?”

He was being mocked and laughed at.

But he couldn’t laugh.

“Because I thought it would be funny. And I was right.”

In a louder voice, Mikael spoke so the entire world could hear him.

“Congratulations Joke. You finally made someone laugh. I’m not laughing with you, of course. You’re not funny in the least. You’re not even relevant, really. A clown in a suit with delusions of adequacy. Don’t you get it?”

Mikael’s smile was one of dark amusement.

“*You* are the joke.”

Enough tainted blood to drown a city boiled with the Joker.

The beast was unleashed.

Mikael’s smile widened.

******

“How the Green has fallen,” Ciara sighed in lament as Priscilla released her invisibility.

She didn’t call out to Ivy’s spirit as she tore her scythe from her back. There was no need.

Let the tormented woman rest in peace.

‘The Green’s Free,’ Sir Bard called out.

Priscilla sighed in relief as she stored the corpse away.

She had done it.

They finally had it.

A method to reach this Oppressor.

It had finally overextended, using an Avatar to supplant the Green as it had done to The Metal and The Divided.

But Avatars were also a connection the Family could use.

Once Robin had discovered the infected Ivy planning this attack with the Joker, Ciara had seen an opportunity.

If Sir Bard needed to touch something to free it, and an Avatar embodied a Parliament on the planet, could he not free the Parliament through the Avatar?

And, since the infected Parliaments were in a coalition against the non-infected, could they not also find out who or where this Oppressor was by freeing a previously infected Parliament? They'd still deny their enemy an asset even if it didn't work.

There had been some concern that the villainess wouldn't aid them, so they had decided to Free the Green through her, kill her, and have Tsunade reach out to Parliament instead. That way, they didn't need to fear further betrayal and infection.

Mikael had been all for trying it, ready to go Free Ivy immediately, catch the Joker, and throw him at Amelia to have fun with.

It had been Priscilla who had suggested, insisted really, on this course of action.

It hadn't been any sort of mercy for the villains that had stayed her hand. Instead, she thought they could be more useful to her Family.

Sir Bard lamented that, after the initial burst of waryness, people were taking the Beast Plague for granted. Either dropping their guard, not getting healed as soon as they could, or testing its empowering abilities more and more.

Why not give them a reminder of its threat?

Her only genuine concern had been the safety of her guests, but Medea had been thorough in her defences. Not only had Robin kept an eye on them the whole time, disabling any threat they posed before they could use it, but a bounded field separated the space of the stands from everything else.

Barring the people on the stage, nobody else could have been hurt at all.

Priscilla watched Sir Bard, muttering about 'shitty Arkham boss design,' slay the Joker Beast with a wave of fire.

He had assured her he could excite the Old Blood to cause a transformation on command, though supposedly the opposite was impossible, and the towering beast had been proof enough for everyone watching that the Beast Plague was very much real and still a threat.

With a wave of his hands to dispose of the bodies, the attack was over.

Now, one final plan. This one was all her own.

“Sorry for the interruption, folks,” Sir Bard called out, his face projected onto the sky. “Though I hope some of you will sleep a little better tonight now that the trash has been dealt with.”

People cheered. Not everyone, of course. Many were still processing what had happened.

They had gone from a beautiful show to terror at a villain attack, befuddled confusion, a few moments of humour, another rise of fear, and complete safety once more.

It took a moment to process, and Mikael was there to help them along.

“We’ll deal with all the testimonies, reports, and all that stuff for you, don’t worry. That’s the worst part of these types of things. The paperwork. If only villains were less of an inconvenience.”

With his every word, aided by his Performance Talent, Siren Song, and his own charisma, Mikael was wooing the crowd back to where he wanted them.

He was turning a villain attack from something scary to an event people would talk about excitedly in their day-to-day lives.

They weren’t in any real danger. The Elden Lord was protecting them, after all.

Instead of causing trauma, the attack would just spur the fame of the concert and Priscilla’s career.

It was common for villains to target large events. That’s where most people gathered, likely the rich and famous. But now, people would think of Priscilla’s shows would almost be a safe haven. After all, the Elden Lord was there, supporting his wife.

Who’d be crazy enough to try something?

Did you see what he did to the Joke?

Even if you couldn’t see the Elden Lord, he was there.

By the time the crowd was calmed again, the mood high, and all fear gone, it was almost time for the final countdown to the New Year.

Time for Priscilla’s last plan of the night, the one nobody knew of but her and Ciara.

“Welp, it’s almost time, folks,” Mikael said with a chuckle, looking at his wrist as if to check a watch. Of course, he didn’t have a watch, but his exaggerated overacting further calmed the crowd. “Despite the interruption, I think we’re ready to ring in the New Year. What do you say, dear,” Sir Bard looked at Priscilla with a smile. “Ready to sing us one last song?”

After calming the crowd, the Family’s plan was for Mikael to hand off the mic to Priscilla. She’d lead everyone through a version of Auld Lang Sign, the traditional New Year’s song as she understood it.

Of course, her plan was a little different.

“Why do thee not sing for us instead, Sir Bard?” Mikael’s eyebrows rose in surprise, clearly projected on the sky. Priscilla continued before he could argue, still careful not to give an actual order. “I can think of no better welcome to the New Year than thy music.”

Priscilla had asked Sir Bard to perform with her before, but he had told her that her first show was to be all about her. He feared that thanks to Siren Song, his literally addictive voice, he’d upstage her.

She appreciated his consideration, but she cared not for fame. When she had pressed, he had remained firm, though compromised to play an instrument in the opening song and promised a few duets in the next show.

Still, Priscilla had planned this little trick.

Sir Bard’s place was not in the shadows but here, in the spotlight.

With her.

That, more than anything, was what this entire show was about.

From the opening Nameless Song to the tribute to Sir Blaidd to the villains’ defeat to this small prank.

Sir Bard did not need to be ashamed of his actions, of the need for his Hunt.

He need not put up a show for them, his Family.

They were not so weak that only he could support them, and not they support him.

They needed to come together, not move apart.

They needed to find what joy they could. All of them.

As Ciara had predicted, the crowd started to make noise at the idea.

Sir Bard tried to deflect with humour, as she knew he would.

“But nobody is here for this old bag of bones,” Mikael waved her off with false modesty. “They want the pretty girls like you. Crazy whippersnappers, the lot of them.”

“Then, shall we let our guests decide?” Priscilla controlled the flush of embarrassment at the compliment to answer back with the line Ciara had instructed her to use. “Who wants to hear the Elden Lord sing?”

The cheer was deafening, clapping and stomping and egging the man on.

“Traitors!” Mikael shook his fist to the sky dramatically. “All of you, traitors!”

Laughter erupted, but the cheering didn’t stop.

Even Mikael had to give in, lest he spoil the mood.

“Fiiiiinnnnnneeeee,” he heaved a dramatic sigh. The crowd cheered. “But only because it’s almost midnight. And I’m not going to sing because you are a bunch of traitors with traitorous traits.”

The crowd booed, but Mikael ignored them, flying down to the stage.

“Well played,” he whispered to her as he passed. Priscilla smiled, glad she had been able to lighten his mood slightly. Sir Bard always enjoyed it when they got ‘uppity,’ as he put it. The pushback was half the fun, he claimed. “Of course you know, I will get you back later.”

“If you can,” Priscilla tried to be haughty like Lady Emma with her rejoinder, but her tail betrayed her once again as it swayed in happiness.

While she had hoped to hear him sing, this was a good enough result to make her happy. She had feared he’d be cross with her.

Mikael laughed loudly as he approached a piano. The musician hurried to vacate his seat with a bow.

Mikael sat down, cracking his knuckles as he looked around the crowd.

“No, this will not be on the record release. No, I will not tell anyone its name. No, there will not be any encores from me. You traitors asked for it, so you will sit there and enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime experience. If I hear even one word of complaint, I’m cursing all of your shoelaces to get knotted.”

There were more laughs and cheers from the crowd, but they started to quiet down.

“Medea, could you dim the lights, please? And give me a timer for the big moment?”

The night darkened once more, the only light in the dark shining down on the man and the piano.

The musician from before returned with another, carrying a seat for Priscilla. She thanked them gratefully as she sat, reminding herself to thank Lady Frost for her selection of musicians. They had been a delight.

Not wishing to tower over the man and the instrument, Priscilla lay her upper body on top of it while she sat, allowing everyone in the stadium to see the pair.

“We started tonight off with The Nameless Song, so I think it’s only appropriate we end it with this one.”

Despite his words to the crowd, his eyes were on Priscilla’s.

From their positions, him at the keys and her laying atop the instrument, their faces were barely a foot apart.

Both could see the small numbers hovering in the air between them, but it did not obstruct their view of each other.

There were a few moments of silence as Mikael waited, staring into Priscilla’s eyes and smiling.

Then, when the timer was a little over three and a half minutes left, he started to play.

In the dark night, under the eyes of millions of people, Mikael played a song every Souls player held near and dear to their hearts.

If ever there was a call against the fading of the light, it was this.

Not once did Mikael's fingers touch the black keys on the piano as he rang in the New Year, his first since finally joining his Family, with a familiar Pling Pling Plong.

For those three and a half minutes, nothing else existed but a man, a woman, the dark, the light, and a song.

The clock struck midnight as the last note died away.

The crowd cheered.

The two in that lone light heard none of it.

"Happy New Year," Mikael smiled softly as he kissed Priscilla.

Author's Note:

Not gonna lie; I've had the week from hell, and this chapter suffered for it. On top

DREAM VI

"The secret of my influence has always been that it remained secret."
-Salvador Dal

They were The Green.

All that grew.

They were The Green.

Their roots were strong.

They were The Green.

The Parliament of Trees was everywhere. The smallest blade of grass. The most towering of oaks.

They were- "Fucking useless."

The connection shivered in confusion.

They didn't understand.

They were strong. They were life. They were the roots that reached the sky, the seas, and the earth.

They were The Green.

"We get it. You vape." I deadpanned, wishing I had temples I could rub.

Vines swaying in a breeze, growing down, down, down, down.

I couldn't physically get a headache at the moment, but man, this thing was giving its best.

Hardy grass, hidden from the sun's light for months, only to emerge when the snow and ice thawed.

"What does that even mean," Tsunade asked me through the connection.

Cacti flourishing where so much other life had failed.

"Never mind," I sighed mentally, focusing on my future baby momma. "Are you able to get it to answer you clearly?"

A weed growing strong, no matter the opposition.

"It's answering," the former Hokage hedged. "It's not like Nature Chakra. It has a mind. Or rather, quadrillions of tiny unformed senses of self come together to form the Parliament. But it's… it doesn't have the same priorities as us. The same thought process."

Trees turn to ash, only for life to spring anew in the ashes.

"No, you don't say," I drawled sarcastically.

Seeds spread through the air, through the water. There was no corner they could not

reach.

I got an impression of annoyance directed at me from my wife, and had we not been metaphysically communicating with the embodiment of all plant life on earth, I'm sure she would have smacked me over the head.

I chalked it up to my win as I ignored the feeling of a fern blooming under a ray of sunshine.

"It doesn't have eyes or ears, not without an Avatar," Tsunade communicated. "It knows something about what we're asking, 'the Oppressor,' and its… death? It conceives of the time under its control as being 'dead' rather than temporarily controlled. It doesn't want to experience that again, so it insists on making me its new Avatar."

Lightning split my trunk, my bark blackening and dying. Yet I lived still.

"So it's a company that's going bankrupt and is hurrying to sell stocks to raise funds in its panic."

Leaves weakened and fell. The sun grew darker. Colder. Sleep came.

"…Essentially, yes. Only more desperately. It, and maybe the other Parliaments, have a basic understanding of the Defences. Not their exact mechanics, just that we are protected from all outside connections like theirs and their enemy's. They think that if we become their Avatars, not only will they be able to merge with the Island properly, but they will be protected from being 'killed' again."

Water trickled through my roots. The loamy soil enveloped me. I was safe.

"Let me guess, the Black wants Priscilla?"

I fell. My roots dried. I died. I spread. I was reborn in a thousand new seeds.

"Yes. The Parliaments have been keeping a close track of us and have favourites. The Parliament of Flames wants Melina, obviously, but the others have been trying to reach out to their ideal candidates. The Melt wants Glynda, The White likes Ranni, The Grey keeps trying to get Scathach to notice them, and The Red is after Yoruichi."

"Huh," I grunted in half surprised. "Some of those line up, but others are a bit iffy. Are they all this desperate? And what about me? I feel unloved."

"They are all desperate, especially after The Green fell thanks to Ivy. And Melina, you, and I can work with any of them, but we are all spoken for. Any time one of the others tries to reach out to you, they are attacked by the remnants of The Clear. It's almost feral with insistence."

It wasn't like this little meeting of minds had been entirely without answers. We had discovered that The Clear, representing all aquatic life, had been completely shattered by 'the Oppressor' years ago. Not that all marine life had been killed, but that any sort of higher functioning, whether intellectually or spiritually, had been completely broken.

The Parliament of Waves had been scattered to the waves, pun intended.

My presence in the ocean and my Freeing it of trash had started as a sort of healing process, but it would be years before anything but the most animalistic of minds formed.

It was years after that that The Divided fell, actually being subsumed by the enemy rather than destroyed, unlike The Clear. That was when the Parliaments understood they were under attack rather than just some freak accident with The Clear. From there, The Metal fell when its Avatar tried to confront the Oppressor directly.

After that, the Parliaments started playing defence, primarily through Ciara. Before they could infect their respective Parliaments, she had hunted down the rogue Avatars, or potential Avatars. After finishing that, she 'retired' to the Birdcage with Swamp Thing, waiting for an opportunity.

They found one when they realized my Family was unaffected by their Enemy, but the stalemate had lasted until Priscilla had slain Swamp Thing.

The Green and The Red were the most active of the still surviving Parliaments, but the former had no way of working actively without using an Avatar. Plants were generally passive, unlike The Red, which could work through animals. The Clear had also been like The Red, able to operate through marine animals if it needed something actively done.

So the Green, without any choice and unable to act without a medium, had reached out to Poison Ivy. They had wanted to use her as their newest Avatar and continued trying to reach out to me.

But Ivy had already been under the Oppressor's control and glutted with gallons and gallons of Old Blood. Once she became an Avatar, she was an open gateway to The Green.

If it weren't for Robin catching sight of the infected villainess while watching over Gotham and seeing the neon signs pointing out 'Infected Chlorokinetic intent on attacking Ciara,' we might never have known The Green had fallen.

Still, that left me with one question.

"So all these images and impressions are The Green trying to seduce you?"

"Yes."

"And, if I ever lower my Defences to talk to it, The Clear is going to go absolutely piranhas over trying to do the same for me?"

"Probably."

"…Is it wrong that I see nothing wrong with a mindbroken embodiment of nature going full Yandere for me?"

"Yes. Yes, it is. You need therapy."

"Ha! There isn't a therapist in the multiverse qualified enough for all my bullshit. Besides, why pay for therapy when I have thirteen wives ready and willing to provide

succour to this poor battered soul? Physical therapy is still therapy."

"…Maybe I should accept The Green's offer."

"Too late! You can never escape. A part of me is inside you!"

"If you ever call our sons that again, I will find a way to throw you into the sun."

"Yes, dear. I won't, dear. Mikael is a good boy."

"That would be more convincing if you weren't doing your Tobi impression."

"Hn. Maybe I want to be thrown into a sun, hn? Think of the explosion! What art!"

"…Please stop."

"My thoughts exactly. Please FUCKING STOP!"

I did my best to project the full force of my ire through Tsunade's connection to The Green, interrupting its attempt to seduce my wife with another impression of high-quality fertilizer.

It… crinkled, for lack of a better word, in confusion.

I got the impression that most people it wanted as an Avatar would jump at the chance to become one with all the plants it was projecting at us. Power. Immortality. Purpose. Being part of something greater.

What was not to love?

Oh, I don't know. Maybe the fact that Avatars of the Parliaments become their tools? Physical embodiments to carry out their wills.

If it were a power boost and useful abilities, I would be all for signing my Family up for Last Air Bender-type shenanigans with the Parliaments of Earth.

But there was no power without cost.

Becoming an Avatar was to merge with the will of the elements. Not only that but so long as one was an Elemental Avatar, they were bound to uphold the will of their respective element.

The Parliaments were lesser, more restricted versions of the Phoenix Force.

Just because I had allowed Melina to merge with it under extreme duress didn't mean I would jump in bed with a whole bunch of other forces of nature.

Tsunade didn't want to become an Avatar of The Green either, especially not while pregnant. This communion was just to gain information.

And The Green was being fucking useless in that regard.

Talking with Shaper had been so much more productive than this bunch of compost for brains.

"If you want to work with us," I communicated with Parliament of Trees. "We need to know everything you can give us about your 'death.'"

I received another image of a mangrove spreading out over miles and miles of

wetland.

This spirit communion sucked. I want a refund. Two out of ten stars. Would not recommend.

“Let’s try something else,” Tsunade told me.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, almost ready to go on a holy war with a lawn mower.

“I want to try having the Phoenix do the talking for us. Can you manage something like that?”

“…Maybe,” Melina hesitated. She maintained the connection between me and Tsunade while the kunoichi communed with The Green. “Give me a second. All my training has been in trying to become one with it. Separating mind processes like that is a new challenge.”

Us understanding The Green had never been the problem. I was a Great One, for Dagon’s sake. I could communicate with fucking Shards. But this bastard was just too dumb to understand human speech or thought patterns.

If someone wasn’t already a plant elemental, or close enough to actually talk to plants, then trying to speak to it was like talking to a tree.

A dumb tree.

I endured the annoyance of feeling insects and other small creatures dissolving in the water of my flower after getting trapped and turning into delicious, nutritious plant food.

Then I wished to return to the carnivorous plant, as instead, I felt myself release pheromones to attract bees, feeling them rub themselves all over me and spread my pollen.

I feel dirty.

I could feel both Tsunade’s and Melina’s amusement at my plight. For some reason, those two had no issues, essentially living being mentally seduced.

Damnit! I should have made a ‘woo’d’ pun!

This entire thing was throwing me off. It felt so wrong.

It would be one thing if my body were turned into a tree. I could handle that, even if it got boring quickly.

But something like this, where my sense of self was messed with, gave me the hi’bee’ji’bee’s.

We weren’t even connected to The Green; we were just talking with it. There was no danger of it trying to control us since our Defences and my own element would prevent such a thing.

I was safer here and now that I was facing Trigon, the Endbringers, or the Gods, but

just… ugh.

It was wrong.

So wrong.

I was at no risk of losing 'myself,' but still, it was way too close for comfort.

"I think I have it."

Barely had Melina transmitted her words that the feeling of the connection changed.

A sensation of vast power, eclipsing even my own, surrounded us.

It, too, tried to mentally fondle me.

"Back! Back! Back you horny bird! Back, or I'm making fried chicken for Medea! I'll do it! Don't test me!"

With great reluctance, the Phoenix Force's presence distanced itself from me.

I was honestly shocked that actually worked.

Usually, the damn bird spent hundreds of thousands of years pestering me before backing off to do its job.

Was Melina influencing it? Or did it just understand me better?

Either way, the Phoenix Force started to convey our questions to The Green.

"First, ask how it was infected, controlled, or 'died,' or whatever."

The psychic embodiment of all life transmitted the question, and I got a psychic impression that, for some reason, reminded me of the clickers from The Last of Us. What were those mind-control mushrooms called? Corticepts? Something like that.

The Green responded.

We felt ourselves reach out to Poison Ivy, our last hope. We connected. Then, we were flooded with the sensation of death.

Not Death, my patron, but the feeling of cessation. Of the futility of life. Despair. Loneliness. Helplessness.

We reached out to the other Parliaments. We wanted help.

Nothing.

We were alone.

We were dead.

…

Then we were alive again. Our Avatar was dead, and we were Free.

Between one moment and the next, all that was conveyed to us.

"Did they see anything? About how Ivy was infected?" I asked, trying to get some actual usable information.

"No eyes," Tsunade reminded me. "Try asking it about The Rhythm or the Divided."

The Phoenix Force conveyed the questions using the impressions of artificially grown

plants and pollen spores.

We were treated to another rendition of the same visions, the blankness of death ending with me Freeing it.

“Fucking useless.”

I had hoped this would be the smoking gun. The mistake. The flaw in an otherwise masterful concealment of identity.

Secret identities suck when the bad guys use them.

I had hoped to finally have some concrete proof, but this thing was even more useless than I thought.

An entity as powerful as the Parliament of Trees shouldn’t simply keel over and die.

They had to know *something*.

“Mikael. Why don’t you go take a walk?”

Tsunade’s voice brokered no argument despite her effort not to Order me.

I wanted to argue, to point out that I still wanted to answer so many questions.

“We will deal with it,” Melina joined in, taking over from the Phoenix for the moment. “We aren’t in any danger.”

I took a deep breath.

Which was weird since I was just my mind in this place.

The disconnect between the impression of what I was doing and what I wanted to do made me pause.

I didn’t want to be here.

My wives were right.

Getting angry at a bunch of plants wouldn’t help anything. And they knew all the questions I wanted answered anyway and were more qualified to ask them.

I had joined Tsunade partly out of curiosity and partly to Free her if the Parliament of Trees tried something funky while they were communicating. Since that wasn’t the case, I wasn’t needed.

And I *really* didn’t want to be here.

“Alright.”

“We’ll tell you everything we find over dinner.”

“Sure.”

I Freed myself from the connection, physically opening my eyes to the world around me.

We were in some random clearing in the rainforest. The Green couldn’t connect to my Island. I didn’t let it. So we had come out here to be uninterrupted while trying to commune with it.

I sighed.

“Mikael.”

“I’m fine,” I answered Raven immediately.

She stood beside the couch I had pulled out to sit on while doing our little Spirit Journey. Others might want to meditate on a bunch of moss, but I liked my creature comforts, thank you.

Raven had been in my shadow when we started, acting as a physical watch-bird while we were focused on the spiritual realm of the Parliament of Trees.

“If you want to lie, you should hide your emotions,” my big tiddy goth wife deadpanned.

“Then you’d know something was wrong,” I sighed, rubbing my face tiredly. Generally, I let my wives read my mind, and Raven sense my emotions. I had no shame about who I was or what I thought.

But sometimes, I wanted to brood, damnit! Can’t you let a guy be a little emo? Just a little? Pretty please?

“…Do you want to talk about it?”

Did I?

I asked myself that question seriously. I always strove to be self-aware in all things I did. Was I always successful? Of course not, but I tried to never lie to myself, if not anyone else. Recognizing my own hubris, faults, hypocrisies, and emotions was just as important as knowing my abilities and strengths.

So, did I want to talk to someone about it?

“Not right now,” I sighed again, standing up with a stretch. “Later. I want to get my own thoughts in order.”

“Alright,” Raven nodded easily.

Despite myself, I smiled gently and leaned down to give her a light peck on the jewel on her forehead. Her skin darkened slightly, but she tilted her head up, and I obliged her with a real kiss.

“Keep an eye on those two,” I nodded to the ‘unconscious’ bodies of Melina and Tsunade. “Have one of your emoti-clones come get me if something happens. I’d like to be alone for a bit.”

“Sure,” Raven agreed without issues.

She knew exactly what it was like to want privacy, but I couldn’t just sink into a shadowy dimension and leave a bunch of clones to do my work when I wanted to be alone.

“Thanks,” I said, pulling out my phone to see if Valeria had sent me anything while I

was under.

Scathach, Ranni, and Melina were great at finding hotspots of Old Blood and dealing with them. Still, Valeria had been one of the greatest contributors to controlling the infection.

The little genius had programs designed to monitor news, the internet, or even secret communications platforms. Then she compiled that information to find the threats we missed, primarily due to it being individuals of power, such as Strangers or organizations operating in the shadows.

I, or Yoruichi, were the ones that usually delt with those. But I also had asked her to send me alerts for anything that might be too… tragic or distressing.

So long as someone wanted to be Free of the Old Blood, I could help them. Even if they had started to transform into beasts, after I removed the Blood I could pass them over to Amelia to undo any unwanted alterations.

But they had to want it.

And the Old Blood was addictive.

I would know.

That power. That ecstasy. That freedom of release from civilization, morals, or fear.

The Old Blood was intoxicating, and many did not want to be Free of it.

Within all of us are Beasts. Some want to be let out. Some had good reason.

Children who didn't know any better.

The underprivileged looking for an escape.

The weak and oppressed, yearning for a better life.

I dealt with them all, whether it was the street urchins turning into beasts out of starvation or the slaves killing their masters in a bloody frenzy.

I saved those I could, but only one in a million wished to give up power once Beasthood started.

Thankfully, Valeria had not sent me any new hotspots that needed my attention.

With a nod of farewell to Raven, I teleported back to the Mansion.

What to do?

Should I read something? Play a game? I didn't feel like pestering one of my wives at the moment, wanting some solitude, but at the same time, I didn't want to be alone.

The great introvert paradox: wanting to be alone yet desiring companionship.

Only, I had been alone for centuries, and I had so many options for companionship that I was spoiled for choice.

Maybe I should go for a flight?

Or take a nap?

I meandered my way outside the front doors of my home, trying to decide what I wanted to do or if I wanted to do anything at all.

I was so tired.

I found Torrent beside the door, my fat cat nestled between his horns.

“Were you two waiting for me?” I asked with a snort of laughter as my hands rose to pet Medea behind her ears and scratch the base of Torrent’s horns.

My spirit steed gently bumped me with his head while my cat closed her eyes and started to purr.

“Are you two hungry?” Both animals perked up at the mention of food, Medea especially.

I always carried some of the dried berries Torrent liked, and feeding Medea was as simple as growing a tentacle for her to munch on. Seeing them nibble on the food brought a smile to my face.

I honestly had no idea if they had been waiting for me or not. They were bound to me, and I had been giving them doses of Dragon Blood regularly, but I had no idea what Tier they were at or how intelligent they were.

Neither was dumb, I knew that, but nor had they chosen to be anthropomorphized when they were first bound.

I guess being a Spirit Steed and a cat with wings was enough for them to be happy.

Finishing off the berries, Torrent bumped his head against me again.

“Want to go for a ride?” I asked, and Best Boi Torrent neighed in agreement.

I laughed lightly, throwing myself onto his back, having no trouble staying on despite the lack of saddle. It had been too long since I had ridden with my companion.

With the grace of a queen and the jiggle of a bowl full of jelly, Medea walked down Torrent’s mane to nestle between my legs and the horse’s neck.

“All right,” I said, patting my Boi on his neck. “Where to?”

Torrent started at a trot down the pathway through the orchard, slowly gaining speed until we moved at a decent cantor.

Then Torrent jumped, leaping meters into the air, only for a spiritual platform to appear under his hooves and jump again.

Then he did it again. And again. And again.

It didn’t take long for my home to be a tiny speck below us at the southern tip of my Island.

“Since when can you fly?” I asked Torrent as he stopped jumping and started to run.

Torrent didn’t answer me, just lowering his horned head as he sped up, his hooves beating in a rhythm across his spiritual platforms. We were gaining serious speed, moving

much faster than he had ever run.

The wind buffeted us, but none of us were weak enough for something silly like air resistance to slow us down.

We galloped through the sky, passing under, through, and above clouds, and I started to sing Brothers Under the Sun.

We raced the drakes of the mountains as I sang Ghostrider In The Sky.

We flew through the hydra's necks, tying them into knots as it tried to bite us to the tune of Ride of the Valkyries.

We ran across the waves, the sea spray drenching us, much to Medea's displeasure. Her grumpy face had interrupted my rendition of Donkey Riding with laughter.

We zigzagged between mountains, narrowly navigating tight canyons and odd stone formations. Though we weren't in any danger, Rivers in the Desert never failed to get my heart pumping.

We flew together for hours, and I sang whatever I felt like singing at any moment.

Eventually, I was in a clear enough state of mind to actually self-reflect a bit as Torrent trotted through a system of caves near the bounded field that separated my home from the rest of my Island.

Was I still unhappy with how things had turned out? Sure.

While Priscilla had been the one to insist on using her show as bait, I hadn't fought against it nearly as much as I should have. For it to turn out for naught after all that left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I also didn't like the Parliaments, as a rule. Not only had they been a threat to my home and Family with their Avatars, but their one-track mind reminded me of all the problems I had with the Phoenix Force.

A purpose, especially like the preservation of life, was a wonderful thing so long as it didn't become your whole existence. On top of that, unlike the Phoenix Force, if one of my wives decided to become their Avatar, they'd be limited to this reality and those adjacent to it.

I still fully intended to travel the multiverse after I had dealt with the Old Blood and kicked the 'Oppressor' in the crotch a few times for messing with me and my Family. I was petty like that. If the Parliaments had their way, my wives would stay here to act as their guardians and tools. No way was I going to let that happen.

Thanks to dealing with the Beast Plague, I was also in a much more volatile mood than usual. My wives had torn me from my silence a half dozen times already. It wasn't the killing that was the problem so much.

It was the knowledge that I was partially to blame.

Killing in Dark Souls was easy. They were mindless undead.

Killing in Elden Ring was easy. Without the Rune of Death, they'd come back.

Killing in Bloodborne was harder. These weren't undead, and they wouldn't come back. They were just people in a shit situation. I was still able to do it because it needed to be done.

Here? The shit situation people found themselves in would not have been possible without my presence.

Unlike in Bloodborne, the Hunt in this world was both easier and harder.

Easier because I had so many more options and a support network of my Family and the allies we had gained.

Harder because I couldn't lose myself in the joys of battle.

I was simply too strong to get a good fight from anything on earth, especially those who needed to turn to the Old Blood for strength.

Another facet that made life harder was how obvious it was becoming that our enemy was experimenting with the Old Blood, not in a lab like Sinister, but in the real world.

Armies hopped up on blood. Supers injecting themselves and their powers mutating. Entire communities disappearing in a frenzy of slaughter for no reason.

Poison Ivy's attack on the show last night was the perfect example.

Not only had she been infected and mutated, but so had the Joke. Which, honestly, wasn't a surprise.

What was a surprise was that after three weeks, he had not started turning into a beast until I provoked him. Was I supposed to believe it was just a coincidence that the Joker became a Ziz bomb through Tohu, gathered as much Old Blood as possible, and teamed up with Poison Ivy to target my wife in the most public setting possible?

If I believed that, I might as well start listening to J. Jonah Jameson's podcasts.

My enemy's plan was proceeding, my plans were at a halt, and I was spilling an ocean of blood to buy time for one of my wives to gain the ability to snap her fingers to rewrite reality.

I had plenty of reasons to be a bit off, even before a bunch of trees started sending impressions directly into my brain.

Because as much as I was annoyed by everything else, the communication with the Parliament of Trees threw me off the most.

It just hit too close to home.

I could recognize that. It brushed too close to my deepest fears, my greatest insecurities.

The loss of 'myself.'

I shuddered at the memory.

They were just thought impressions from the perspective of the plants that made up the Parliament of Trees, only slightly different from the data packs Shaper had sent me when I communicated with it.

Yet still, I had to hold down my revulsion.

It was so wrong.

“Lord Mikael? Do you need me for something?”

“Hm?” I tore myself from my thoughts at the unexpected voice in these deep caves. “Hippolyta? What are you doing here?”

“Another Carthus Sandworm,” the Queen of the Amazons explained simply, gesturing to her armour and weapon, both of which were covered in gunk and dirt. “It is more efficient for me to hunt it while my people protect the village.”

“…We’re near your village?”

Had I led Torrent down here?

Why hadn’t he astralized? He hated the underground.

“Yes,” Hippolyta nodded slowly, looking me over with a frown. “Are you well, Lord Mikael?”

“…I’m fine,” I said, repressing another shudder as I looked down the tunnels. “I was just leaving.”

I instinctually had a perfect understanding of my Island. While I didn’t know the locations of living beings on it, unless I pulled the entire thing into a Dream, I could navigate even the most complex tunnels with my eyes closed, ears plugged, half asleep, and on every drug known to man and Dragon.

I had never physically visited that place, but I knew what lay in those depths.

I was never going down there.

Medea’s purring gained volume, and Torrent clopped at the ground.

Maybe I was more out of it than I realized if I had led Torrent down here.

“Shall I accompany you?”

“If you want,” I shrugged. “It’s a free Island.”

I turned Torrent around, giving him a pat of thanks for sticking with me, and started a trot up the way I had come.

It was a bit rude to ride a horse while Hippolyta walked, but she didn’t seem to mind.

That, and Medea would not be pleased if she lost her napping spot.

“A fine mount,” the Amazon Queen said, looking Torrent over. “He is not like Artoria’s horse. What breed is he?”

“A Spirit Steed,” I answered as amicably enough as I scratched him below his horns. I

felt him relax slightly, but his body language was still uncomfortable. He really didn't like tight spaces.

He really was the Best Boi for sticking with me.

Still, Hippolyta didn't really care about my traumas. No need to put my baggage on someone else.

"Are there others on your Island? My people would be pleased to have mounts again."

"Do Amazons need mounts?" If I remember my comics right, didn't they use some sort of giant kangaroos?

"Though we are strong and tough, we cannot carry large amounts of supplies without it hampering our combat abilities. Now that we have rebuilt our village, I plan to set up outposts further away so we are not surprised again. Sturdy mounts would facilitate that. That and many of us wish to have companions again. Ones that won't try to kill us like the rest of the fauna of your home."

"Sorry to disappoint then," I laughed lightly. "Torrent is one of a kind, as far as I know. Your best bet is to try and domesticate some of the drakes. I know it's possible; my wives have four of them, but you'd need to ask Medea and Artoria about the exact process of raising them."

My cat popped her head up at the sound of her name, so I gave her a few scratches under her chin to lull her back to sleep.

"I have seen them around," Hippolyta nodded at my cat. "She is usually with them, and they visit to demand food. She always seems to know when we have excess to spare."

"That sounds like my fat floof," I laughed, giving my cat a vigorous rub.

"Where did you find Torrent, if you don't mind me asking?"

"He was a gift," I smiled at the memory. "The first time I met Melina, she gave me a whistle to call him."

"Truly?"

"Yep. In fact, Melina tells me that it was Torrent that led her to me. I don't think I would be here now without both of them. And it was because of him that I met Ranni. She knew his former master and wanted to make sure I would take care of him."

"I see," Hippolyta said, looking over Best Boi with a revaluting look.

"You don't," I shook my head, smiling. I was always happy to brag about my friends. "Torrent isn't just a horse. He's the Best Boi. My companion for decades. Lava. Swamps. Tens of thousands of miles. He's carried me through it all. We've fought demigods together. We've died together. He's been with me through my worst and my best."

"…You are lucky to have each other."

"I've always been lucky with people," I said honestly. "Whether it was my wives, a

few friends, or companions like Torrent, there's always been great people to help me when I really need it. Amidst strange beings, in strange lands, there was no lack of those who reached. The spirit of jolly cooperation is strong with me."

"That is an… interesting choice of phrases."

"Something the first of many friends in my journey told me when we first met. The perfect example of a ray of sunshine in the darkest moment."

"Is…"

"Is what?" I asked as Hippolyta trailed off.

"Is that who you Priscilla singing about? Last night? The one that affected Lady Ranni so?"

"No. That was Blaidd. Another great companion I was lucky enough to meet on my journey, but that was much later. I met Solaire of Astora centuries before I made it to Ranni's world. Though I suppose you could say the first song Priscilla sang was about him and others. And the one I played could also be considered about Solaire, if only tangentially.

We travelled silently for a bit, Hippolyta deep in thought, but I didn't mind.

Talking about Torrent and then Solaire helped my mood tremendously.

The vast majority of my time spent in my prison had been spent alone, journeying through one world after another. The only meetings between me and enemies out for my soul.

But that made those few joyful meetings all the more precious.

I hated the Kiln. I hated the First Flame. I hated the pain, my weakness, and the fact that I couldn't change the world to make the fire unnecessary. I hated the cycle.

But I never regretted being fuel for the Age of Fire. Not when it preserved the world of those I cared about.

A delay of the inevitable Age of Dark wasn't so bad when you understood you were doing it so others could live.

That's why I could never hate Gwyn, because if I had been in his situation, I would have made the same choice as him.

I did make the same choice as him.

It didn't take us long to reach the surface, even though we weren't hurrying.

"Thank you."

"No problem," I said easily as I felt Torrent shiver in pleasure under me at having the sky above him again. I gave him a few more scratches and some berries as a reward.

"I do not mean just for your company, Lord Mikael," Hippolyta said seriously, looking me dead in the eyes. "I also mean for allowing us to live here. For helping defend our

home. For last night."

"All I am doing is letting you freeload for a bit," I snorted. "I have plenty of space. It has cost me literally nothing to help you. And last night? Did you see that booth? It was needlessly huge. Even with all of you, my wives, and the Teen Titans, there were dozens of free seats."

"The costs are irrelevant," Hippolyta denied. "What matters is the hands extended when we needed it. You have gone above and beyond what could be expected after my people have done to you and your Family."

"My Family survived," I answered plainly. Hippolyta winced at the reminder of what her following the will of the gods had cost. "Make no mistake, I am a petty bastard. But my revenge is proportional to what I suffered. As far as I care, you lost more than I did, so we're square. Everything since? It's been gained by your own hands. Even the show last night. You were only invited because you helped my Family deal with a thorn in our side. I do not do charity. I cannot stand damsels, slaves, or pets."

"Mrow!"

"You're not a pet. You provide an invaluable service with your floofy goodness."

"Mrow."

"My point is," I returned my attention to the woman before me. "I have done nothing that you haven't earned. Even letting you live here is contingent on you all surviving. You might not be thanking me in a century when one of yours dies to a Basilisk or Rune Bear."

"… My daught- Diana, is right. You truly are unable to accept thanks, aren't you?"

"Only when it is unearned. Otherwise, I am all for basking in adoration and praise."

"Then why are you not out there now? There must be hundreds of millions praising your name at the moment."

"Why would I care for some faceless scrubs sucking up to the local dragon?"

"Then why are you trying to save them?"

"I'm just cleaning up my mess."

"And before that? Why did you help with the Endbringers?"

"Do you have any idea how long I'd be on the metaphorical couch if I just let a bunch of people die when I could do something about it with practically zero risk to myself?"

"Trigon? Doomsday? My daughter explained everything before we invited you. Why help then?"

"Ask my wives. They're the reason I'm involved in most things."

"… I don't believe you."

"I don't care if you believe me or not. It's the truth."

"I think you are full of hot air. I think you are using your wives as excuses. I think,

even without them, you'd want to help anyway. I think you are a good person."

"It's a good thing I don't care what you think either. If you want to paint me as a hero in your mind, go ahead. Just don't be surprised when I fail to meet your expectations."

"Not a hero. I know heroes. You are not a hero. You are a good person."

"Try explaining that to the mountains of corpses. I'm sure they'd love to hear about what a good person I am."

"A good person is still a person. They can fight. They can kill. They can die. They can become monsters. Especially if they are hurt enough."

"Do you think the universe cares about our pain? Newsflash, it doesn't give a shit. There are always more people, more planets, more galaxies, more universes. And if they all disappear? It still won't care. It doesn't care if we live or die. If we are hurt or happy. It doesn't care if you are all alone if your backstory is tragic or not, or if you are a good person. It. Does. Not. Care."

"Are you the universe? Or are you Mikael?"

"…"

"You don't care what I think? Then I will tell you what I think, and you can ignore me. I think you do care. I think you cared about people. I think you reached out, you were hurt, and you taught yourself not to care. I think you were a good man but were put in a situation where you had to choose between being good and surviving. You chose to survive."

"As if that is a choice!"

"I think, now that you have all this Family, this happiness, and all this power, you are trying to be a good man again and are using excuse after excuse to justify it. I think you have been so hurt that you can't accept a Hades damn thank you because you don't think you deserve it!"

"I think you need to stop trying to make me into something I'm not in your head. I am not some tragic hero, some wounded bird that needs to be nursed back to health to rejoin society. Was I dealt a shit hand? Sure. So were you. So was everyone in this world. Get over it. That's life. We can't control Life. It just is. All we can control is ourselves and how we react to it. And I choose this. I am who I want to be."

Hippolyta glared at me, and I glared right back.

I had remained on Torrent's back, but she had flown up to look me in the eye.

This woman drove me absolutely crazy, and not in a good way.

If I were single, would I mind engaging in a bit of hate-fucking to get it out of our system? Of course not. She was hot and my type.

But I was married, and Hippolyta wasn't Mine, so I was just frustrated with her.

At the same time, a part of me was glad to see her like this.

The gods and her people had been keeping this woman caged. Peace was good, so long as it didn't engender passivity.

Covered in worm guts, face flush in rage, glaring at me, Hippolyta looked alive in a way that I wouldn't have imagined when I first met her.

I was right.

A happy ending wasn't a world without conflicts.

A happy ending was a world where you were alive.

Hippolyta whirled and, without a word, flew off toward her village.

"I think that means I won," I stage whispered to Torrent, who just flicked his ears in response.

Medea just gave me The Cat Look(TM).

I still didn't know what The Cat Look(TM) meant, but I'm sure I didn't want to find out. It was probably something as absurd as it was insulting and pitying.

"Common, we should be getting back for dinner," I said, giving them both some scratches.

Torrent took off again, rising high in the air until we were just below the clouds. I could see the Mansion from here, but instead of flying down to it, I had my steed stand in the air over it and face northward.

My home stretched before me, the enormous stretch of land looking endless, even from this high up. Mountains. Forests. Plains. Poisonous swamps. Surrounding it all was the colossal white mountains of scales and spikes.

My true body wrapped around my home, mostly concealed under the ocean, yet still large enough that some of my spines were higher than the Himalayas. If it weren't for residing in my own dimension, my presence alone would shift the weather and the currents. As it was, the entire shipping industry went around me.

I don't know why I did it, and I probably scared all those people who were living in those floating towns around me, but I raised my true head from the seabed.

I was careful not to actually disturb the water, lest I set off a tsunami, but that wouldn't stop people from freaking out.

I didn't move slowly, but I was so large that it still took minutes for my head to fully clear the water, my long, draconic neck holding it right above the waves and the tips of my horns well beyond the clouds.

Despite my supernaturally enhanced vision and my unobstructed view, I couldn't even see my whole head from up here. It blocked out the entire horizon. Just a wall of white scales and an enormous eye looking back at me.

For a while, I just sat there in the air.

I looked up at myself, looking down at myself, sitting on my flying horse.

I couldn't help it.

I laughed.

I looked so… small.

So absolutely minuscule and insignificant that a stray huff of breath from my body would send me to the other side of the earth.

But I also looked so big. So gargantuan and powerful that this planet, this world, was too small to hold me.

And this was my body after spending months using Priscilla's spell to steadily shrink.

I had years before my actual body was at a size usable in day-to-day life; until then, I was stuck with such a puny avatar.

I had always dreamed of seeing everything the world had to offer, the most magnificent vistas and spectacular sights.

I never dreamed that I'd be one of them.

It was so absurd that I couldn't believe it sometimes.

I was this tiny creature, this human shell.

I was this colossal being, fit more for legends and myths than reality.

I was the unknowable abomination lurking below the surface.

I was all three.

I was Me.

Was this what I had hoped for when I made that Deal?

"You're such a handsome bastard," I told myself with a laugh. "How'd you get so lucky?"

Man, I was tired.

"**I was just born this way,**" I answered, wishing I had my own Dragon Breath to huff out a puff of smoke. Then again, if I did, it would probably blot out the sun for the rest of the week for the floating villages.

"Was it worth it?" I asked. "Even after everything. All the pain, fear, and loss. Was it worth it? Would you do it again, knowing what it would cost?"

"In a heartbeat. Every second was worth it. Dark Souls. The Kiln. Elden Ring. Bloodborne. Doomsday. Trigon. Gods. The Old Blood. All the death and destruction. After all that, nothing has changed the fact that I have never been happier."

I was tired.

I'd always be tired.

That was Life.

I'd chosen this. I'd chosen Life, now I had to live it.

Sometimes it sucked. Sometimes it was exhausting. Sometimes I just needed to get away from it all.

But that was Life.

And damned if I wasn't happy to be alive.

I rested my head against the seabed again as I led Torrent down to the Mansion.

"What was that about," Medea asked me as we landed in front of the building, looking out towards my sinking head. My cat wasted no time jumping into her arms and snuggling against the witch's chest.

Usually, I'd be mad at the floofy little traitor, but I'd choose boobs over me any day so I couldn't judge.

"Just admiring my handsome face," I said with a laugh, dismounting from Torrent with a final pat on his side. He gave me one last head bump before trotting off to nibble on some fruit from the orchard.

Medea rolled her eyes fondly, petting the fat floof as she did so.

I hadn't been saying all of that out loud, of course. If I did, they would have been able to hear me from Nova Scotia to Spain.

"Since you have decided to grace us with your handsome face," the witch said sarcastically. "You can help us settle an argument."

"What's going on?"

"We think we know who the Oppressor is."

"Really? That's great! Did Tsunade get something from the council of shrubberies?"

"Yes, but some of us don't agree with the conclusion of the others."

"What's the issue," I asked as I hurried to make my way towards the sitting room where I could hear raised voices.

"I'll let them present their arguments. If they're right, you won't like it."

I raised a brow in question, but the scene I found was pretty self-explanatory.

Most of my wives were at the edges of the room, watching the argument with interest but not directly on one side or the other.

In the center of the room, Diana and Raven stood opposite Tsunade and Robin. All four looked at me as I entered, their eyes lighting up, and I suddenly felt very vulnerable.

"Perfect timing," Diana greeted me before looking over at Robin. "You can help explain."

"Explain what?"

"Why Darkseid can't be the Oppressor."

Man, Medea was right.

I really didn’t like that idea.

Author's Note:

One last slow chapter before things start getting a bit crazy. I'll try to make things as clear as possible, but we'll be moving quickly in these last few chapters, and I wanted to explore Mikael's mindset a bit since it's crucial to what is to come.

Only a handful left, and I am feeling the pressure. Almost two years and 750k words, all for these coming weeks. I am excited.

I will see you all next week.

DREAM VII

"There is just so much hurt, disappointment, and oppression one can take... The line between reason and madness grows thinner"
-Rosa Parks

"You're going to need to back up a bit," I said, grabbing a seat as I looked at the four women in the center of the living room.

Mindlessly agreeing with someone was a surefire way to get stabbed in your sleep, and that danger multiplied by a factor of thirteen when in a relationship with a baker's dozen women.

"Darkseid? Why do you think it's not him? And why do they think it is?"

With all the trouble this 'Oppressor' had given me, I couldn't help but try to figure out who it was. The problem wasn't that I didn't have suspects but that I had too many.

Both DC and Marvel were filled with a whole host of beings who could qualify as 'Oppressors.'

Hell, even Worm had a few.

I still hadn't discounted the possibility that this was some sort of long-term ploy by an Entity, either Zion, Eden, or some unknown third entity.

Given what we knew, it was unlikely, but it wasn't impossible.

My list of suspects was long.

Highest on my list were beings like Sublime, Nekron, Apocolypse, Brainiac, Dormammu, Mephisto, Sinistro, Ra's al Ghul, Luthor, Psycho Pirate, a turbo version of Jack Slash or something like them. Even Dr. Doom was up there, even if an asterisk was near his name at the moment.

Those beings of significant power but who were long-term planners, psychics, or focused on manipulating emotions.

This was a crossover world, and I had already seen plenty of differences between it and straight comics, so there was every possibility that it could be something completely unexpected. Still, I had to work with what I was given.

It wasn't like Darkseid wasn't considered. He was the physical embodiment of Tyrrany, after all.

But some beings were so powerful that, despite their ability to do everything the 'Oppressor' did, they would not need to go through all the trouble.

Darkseid was up there with 5th-dimensional beings like Mr. Mxyzptlk, reality warpers like Mad Jim Jaspers or someone with the Infinity Gauntlet.

The simple truth was that if any of those beings were the 'Oppressor,' this version of Earth would have fallen under their control or been destroyed long before we arrived.

"I am saying it can't be Darkseid because he would never act like this," Diana argued, looking between me and Robin. "He is supremely confident and egotistical. He would never waste decades on one version of Earth. He would appear and conquer the world, killing all who oppose him and enslaving the rest. Then he'd move on. If he were responsible, he would have arrived when the Earth was almost wholly defenceless except for the gods. He'd have wiped them out."

"Not even Trigon at his peak believed he could defeat Darkseid directly," Raven continued, looking far calmer than her fellow heroine. "He schemed against him but never challenged him directly."

I felt the urge to point out all the times Darkseid had been defeated in comics as if to say, 'Let us consult the Holy Texts,' but realized I'd be helping prove their point.

It wasn't that Darkseid never lost. He lost quite a few times. He was the go-to DC villain when the writers wanted to make a significant crossover event or raise the stakes, like Batman and the Joke or Luthor and Superman. Only Darkseid was the archnemesis of the entire Justice League instead of just one hero.

The problem was that Darkseid was never truly defeated.

For one, he existed in a literally different sense of reality—not a 'world' like Marvel or DC, or dimensions like Earth 616 or Earth 52, but a facet of reality separate from the rest.

A conceptual existence similar to Plato's philosophical World of Forms.

The New Gods of Genesis and Darkseid's world of Apokolipse were more ideas than actual beings. Even if they died, they'd return if they were strong enough. They had the concept of death, but it wasn't permanent.

Every time they went to another 'world,' it was less like they were teleported there and more like they were reflecting a part of themselves through a film of water to mirror themselves there. In doing so, they left the most significant portion of their being behind.

I remember some comic writers explaining that every depiction of Darkseid was a fraction of the actual being. Pieces of a mirror.

In a way, Darkseid was a meta-being beyond the 4th wall. He was the conceptional representative of a 'Tyrant' or a 'Villain' in comics.

That made him increadibly popular for writers to use. Still, every time he 'lost,' it was because of some unique contrivance or situation that the writers created to deal with him.

"I actually agree with them," I nodded at Diana and Raven. "I just can't see why he'd bother with such a convoluted plan. Why use the Endbringers? He has a literal world of soldiers, entire realities under his control, and his lieutenants would spank most

Endbringers like naughty children. And the emotional manipulation doesn't fit either."

"I knew you'd agree," Diana sighed in relief.

I almost felt bad.

"All that being said, I'm willing to be convinced differently," I said, steepling my fingers in the classic Gendo Ikari pose. "Go on."

Diana's hands made little clenching motions as if she wanted to wring my neck, and even Raven shot me a slight glare.

I tried not to smile.

I failed.

"Thank you," Robin smiled, utterly unsurprised by my actions. Tsunade rolled her eyes. Her smile became a touch kinder as she met Diana's gaze. "I do agree with you, too." The Amazon's brows raised, but Robin continued. "I also have no idea why Darkseid would choose this route. But I am confident it is him."

"Why?"

"First off, we can eliminate all necromantic possibilities from our list of suspects," Tsunade started. "The Green is the only sapient being we are certain was under control that we have freed, so we need to operate with the information it provided as our primary source rather than our speculation. Similarly, The Green fall to an enemy and your subsequent 'Free'ing of it corroborates Ciara's information."

"If it were necromancy rather than a form of Mastering, I wouldn't be able to have Freed The Green," I begrudgingly nodded.

I made it a point of fact to 'Free' everyone I touched, but so far, nobody had reacted to anything that we could conclusively prove was the shadowy 'Oppressor.'

I had managed to root out a few dozen Masters, Strangers, or psychics, but none had the power or scope to fit our shadowy enemy. It still might have been them, but their touch had been increadibly subtle, such as on Sinister, so we had no way to know who was an enemy agent and who was just an asshole.

Same with the Blood Plague.

Our foe was learning about the Old Blood more and more every day, but was it passively watching or actively creating test scenarios? Were world leaders experimenting with a known super plague because of a desire for power, desperation, or because someone was directing them to?

All the influence seemed to come from within themselves. The only mark we had been able to prove was the occasional fount of knowledge someone shouldn't have that could have only come from an outside source.

"Next, we need to rule out all the powerful psychics," Tsunade continued. "Because

the Phoenix Force would have sensed them."

I realized that was an excellent point as I looked to Melina, who nodded in agreement.

She still didn't have the control to directly manipulate reality, but she had been working on her psychic abilities non-stop for weeks now, on a global level. Even if she wasn't a great host, she'd still have noticed a global psychic controller.

I hadn't discounted a possible psychic attack because, for all her power, Emma was not the most skilled psychic entity, as proven when she didn't catch Xavier's little trap in Amelia. Melina wasn't better than Emma, but the Phoenix was, and the pair were in regular communication now.

Hadn't I just seen Melina separate herself from it a few hours ago?

"For those same reasons, we remove magical and technological enemies from the list. Both Medea and Valeria would have found either of those."

"So we are left with either a soul-based control or a reality-based one," I said, looking around the room to see if I was missing any possible ones. Nobody corrected me. "I assume it is the former since there'd be no need for all the effort if it was the latter. Snap, and you win."

"Emotions are connected to the soul," Medea said pensively, and Raven gave a simple nod, agreeing as well for obvious reasons. Her emotions were literal parts of her soul. "Hypnotism and other controls can wear off, but if a soul is corrupted or influenced, it would pass on to the rest of the being from within instead of without and would be permanent, except for in conceptual cases like your 'Freedom' or directed spiritual healing."

"It was Robin's idea. We're not experts on souls," Tsunade picked up again, gesturing to herself and Robin. "But we know they are real in pretty much every world. Our worlds had ways of attacking and manipulating souls, so it wasn't out of the question our enemy was doing."

"I had the idea from Perona and Big Mom," Robin shrugged when I looked at her. "Both of them worked with souls and were tied to emotions. Big Mom even needed fear to use her power most effectively."

I didn't know if souls existed in my original world, but they were real in every other world we knew about and interacted with. In fact, now that I think of it, everyone here had some connection to souls in one form or another.

Glynda fought with Aura, the manifestation of her soul. Yoruichi was a literal soul reaper. The women from Fromsoft games went without saying all my Servant wives were manifestations of the souls of dead heroines. I even gave a whole spiel about souls in comic realities on national television.

Was I actually dumb? How had I not thought of this before?

Was it just because I thought 'Master' and went, 'Oh, it's obviously a mental attack?'

Was I so fearful of having my mind, my Self, controlled that I had given no thought to my soul?

I knew I had one. I had to, even if it wasn't human. I could see the souls of the dead, for crying out loud, and some of them were definitely not human.

Was it because I was from a world where souls were unproven and just unconsciously discounted them?

Kakashi-sensei would weep for my lack of looking underneath the underneath.

"Ok, operating under the belief it's a soul-based process, why would that lead you to think Darkseid?"

"If you're thinking of the Anti-Life Equation, it does not work like that," Diana argued with a grimace. "If Darkseid had it, he'd just dominate this reality and be done with it."

I side-eyed my Amazon a bit.

I never knew from which continuity my comic-based wives were, but they had stuck mainly to and talked about 'canon' events, so there was every possibility that she had faced Darkseid before. She had likely been under his control through cybernetic methods or the Anti-Life Equation.

Was her vehemence against it being the Lord of Apokolips because she understood him better or because she didn't want it to be him?

Still, Diana had a point, so I looked at Robin to explain more.

"There are two reasons we believe it to be Darkseid," Robin explained. "The first is The Green's testimony. Its experience almost perfectly matches what the Anti-Life Equation would do."

"Before you continue," Raven interrupted, making Robin pause in her tracks. The Demon Lord looked over at Emma. "She's back."

"Send me over," the mutant said with a grimace. "It's time I dealt with this."

Raven nodded, and Emma disappeared into her own shadow.

"What's that about," I asked.

"An issue with the most recent group," my Big Tiddy Goth Wife said without inflection. "She'll explain more when she's done."

It took me a moment to realize she was talking about the group of people Raven was continuously having her emoticlones teleporting to touch my scales to Free them of the Old Blood. At this point, I did it on autopilot.

"While we wait for Emma to return," Glynda spoke. "What is the Anti-Life Equation?"

"It is a source of power for those looking to dominate the wills of others."

“To be more specific, it is a mathematical proof of the futility of life,” I elaborated on Diana’s words. “The theory goes that ‘If someone possesses absolute control of you, you’re not really alive.’ Basically, if someone with the Anti-Life Equation presents it to you, proof that life isn’t worth living, you give up the will to live and become their slave in your entirety. No longer alive, without actually dying.”

“Because of… math?” Yoruichi asked doubtfully.

“Comics, especially DC, went through a phase where math, science, and the like were the main subjects of fear. In my world, they were created during the dawn of the information age, and most people feared the changes. Hell, the Anti-Life Equation was created as an almost direct allegory representing the dangers of emails and the internet, as that was how Darkseid originally spread it all over the world. Which is hilarious in retrospect.”

“There is some basis to the logic, even outside of worlds like this,” Medea explained. “Even magecraft can be reduced to formula. True Magics can’t, but the number of True Magics has shrunk from thousands to only five in the modern Human Order. This is because of math and science. Humanity has learned to understand and quantify the world and, in doing so, control it. It isn’t out of the realm of possibility that True Magics will entirely disappear once the likes of the soul, dimensions, time, or others have been mathematically proven.”

“A unified ‘Theory of Everything’ is the theoretical end point of science. It is a process of hypothesis testing, revision, discarding, adapting, and new hypotheses. Repeat infinitely until you understand everything and, in doing so, control everything,” I shook my head. “Humanity can’t achieve it due to its limited lifespan, limited computing processes, and lack of tools to detect and quantify much of reality. But it is theoretically possible, if realistically impossible.”

“I would think you would be against such an idea,” Robin said with a raised brow. “Given your belief in Freedom.”

I blinked in surprise, then realized that Robin was making the same mistake most people make when discussing this subject.

“Free will, if it exists, would be part of that ‘Theory of Everything,’”

I shook my head. “You are mistaking a ‘Theory of Everything’ with the mind experiment ‘Laplace’s Demon.’ I can’t stand that thing. Scientific determinism is a fundamentally flawed belief system. It doesn’t consider not only what we don’t know, the unknown unknowns but also emergent properties that arise on macro scales that aren’t represented in micro levels of reality. If it did, it would be boiled down to the following: ‘If something exists that knows everything, then that thing would know everything.’ Which,

duh."

I wished Valeria was here. She could help present the idea better. My fault for not choosing a 'Science Waifu' because of their lack of utility in a Soulsborn world.

"Ultimately, science is not a belief system, no matter what some think. It is a process. One that tests and refines beliefs against reality and discards what is proven wrong. If done right, science encompasses magic and divinity as well, if they exist. Every single scientific theory is just that—a theory. We must all be aware that what we consider true now will almost certainly be discarded in the future as ignorance. Not too long ago, humanity thought phrenology was peak science."

"It is a theoretical Root rather than the actual Root of my world," Medea joined in again before I could really get going Laplace's bullshit. "Someone or something that has achieved complete knowledge of everything is not bound by time and space. If anything ever does reach that endpoint, then they already have. If we use the Catalogue as a base, they aren't Tier 12 or 13. They are Tier Infinite because even the Company and we would be included in the 'Theory of Everything.' Including whatever attained it. That is why it is completely irrelevant. Ultimate power is ultimately useless because that would include power over the 'self' that gained it. They'd be included in the 'Theory of Everything.'"

I twitched.

"Anyway," I said, trying to drag us back on topic. "The Anti-Life Equation. Originally, it was used as I said. A method of control of life forms. Over the years, it has been used from everything as a source of power to those who have a fragment of the complete thing, to a way to bring back the dead, to a sapient… being."

As I said the last word, I looked at Diana in realization and sympathy.

Her teeth were clenched, and she looked away from eyes.

"What? What am I missing?" Yoruichi asked, looking between myself and the Amazon.

"The Anti-Monitor," Diana bit out. "It is the thing that destroyed my universe. It is a being that was originally mortal before attaining the Anti-Life Equation, merging with it, and becoming a physical embodiment. My world was just one of countless others that were wiped out."

Raven put a reassuring hand on the Amazon's back, and Artoria even went so far as to give her friend a hug.

Diana gave them both a stoic nod of thanks, clearly trying to act strong.

"You see why it cannot be the Anti-Life Equation," she asked Robin. "If that kind of power were in the hand of our enemy, we would not be having this discussion. We'd have already fled, and nothing would have remained of this reality."

Robin's mouth was set in a grimace of sympathy, but she didn't back down.

"If it makes you feel better," I said, trying to defuse some of the tension. "The Equation either doesn't work like that here, or it doesn't exist at all in this reality."

"How do you know?" Diana asked, the words coming out bitter.

"I tried it," I shrugged casually.

"You WHAT!"

"Tried it," I said with a smile despite the looks I was getting. "It, the Life Equation, the Speedforce formula, and others. As soon as I realized this was a comic world. I'd be stupid not to."

"That does not, in fact, make me feel better," Raven deadpanned.

"If. I said, 'If it makes you feel better.'" I pouted. "Here, watch. 'Loneliness + alienation + fear + despair + self-worth ÷ mockery ÷ condemnation ÷ misunderstanding · guilt · shame · failure · judgment n = y where y = hope and n = folly, love = lies, life = death, self = dark side.' See? Nothing happened."

"Mikael," Diana growled with a glare. Man, she looked mad.

"Relax," I sighed, trying to calm her down. "I know for a fact that just knowing the Equation and using it isn't inherently bad. And it didn't work anyway. Either just knowing the Equations isn't enough, this world's Equations are different, or I was missing something. It could just be that our words are but a human's interpretation of the actual formula. As a Great One, I would probably understand if confronted with it, but getting it off the pages of a comic might not be enough."

I hadn't been trying to dominate others; I was experimenting with potential sources of power that my meta-knowledge might grant me for free.

As I said, I'd be stupid not to try, at least.

In at least one comic, Scott Free becomes immune to the Anti-Life Equation's power and influence by knowing it, and he could pass that immunity along to others.

"Thou can at least trust Lord Husband to take care when poking the Rune Bear," Ranni 'defended' me.

I mock glared at the blueberry.

"Not true," Melina chimed in. I didn't like that smile. "This one time, he found a glade with six of the biggest Rune Bears I've ever seen and-"

"We agreed never to mention that!"

"I never agreed."

"ANY WAY," I very subtly directed the conversation back on track and away from the traitorous traitoress. "My point is that I took precautions. I never lowered my Defences and kept my Elements going the entire time."

I pretended not to notice the looks the rest of my wives gave Melina and her nod.

I'm sure they'll all know the story by tomorrow.

"I shall believe you this time," Diana nodded imperiously, but I heard her faint sigh of relief. "I would hate to lose you simply due to carelessness."

Gah.

Direct Hit.

It was Super Effective.

The Gap Moe was too strong.

Mikael is attrachted.

I lunged.

Diana's eyes widened in surprise.

She tried to move out of the way, but I wouldn't be denied.

"Who's a strong, independent woman," I cooed as I rained Diana's face with kisses. "You are. Yes, you are."

"This is highly demeaning," Diana snarked, trying to remove me. "And insulting. Get off me."

"Who doesn't need a man? You don't. No, you don't."

"A little help," Diana asked the room.

"I think you're fine," Yoruichi answered, not hiding her laughter.

"Who's a feminine icon? You are. Yes, you are."

"I won't even ask," Emma sighed, emerging from the shadows once more to see me aggressively cuddling the heroine.

We all knew my brief bout of Cute Aggression was nowhere near as offensive as Diana was acting like it was.

Partially because I was so over the top everyone could tell I was joking and partially because the Amazon should have no problem tossing my human avatar across a county or three if she genuinely wanted out of my grasp.

"What was that about?" I asked the mutant, not bothering to stop aggressively cuddling Diana with my best lamprey impression.

Or was it closer to a squid, given that I was a Great One?

Food for thought.

And hentai.

Ironically, none of my Family had that particular fetish, nor did I, so any sort of tentacle action was limited to cuddles and feeding my cat.

Consensual cuddling tentacles.

Consentacles.

“I’ll tell you when we are done here,” Emma said, retaking her seat. “What did I miss?”

“Exposition on science, the Anti-Life Equation, and how fucked we’d be if it really is Darkseid,” I deadpanned, unable to resist giving Diana’s fantastic ass a squeeze.

“Enough!”

With a move not out of place in a wrestling competition, the Amazon contorted her body so she had her arms around me, lifted me above her head, and threw me at an empty sofa.

I landed perfectly horizontal on the cushions, the couch sliding back from the force but not tipping over.

“Most men would pay their life savings, an arm, their right nut, and both their lungs to have you throw them on a couch like that.”

Judging by her glare, Diana clearly didn’t appreciate my objective analysis of the situation.

That’s all right. The others were on my side.

“You don’t get to complain when you could have done that a while ago,” Glynda said, adjusting her glasses with a smirk, and Diana turned her glare on the teacher.

“If you want revenge, you just need to grab his ass back,” Scathach pointed.

“I’d let you,” I chirped happily.

Then flinched.

Robin tried to look innocent at my look, but I wasn’t buying it. My ass was against the cushion, so she was the only one it could have been.

“Enough,” Diana repeated, but I caught the slight twitch of mirth in her lips as she looked back at Robin. Mission Accomplished. “Now that we’re all here, explain why you are so certain it’s Darkseid after all that.”

“To do so, I need you all to look this over,” Robin said, reaching into the bottomless box Medea had given everyone based on mine from Dark Souls.

She pulled out a broken fragment of a trident. It had clearly seen better days, covered by rust and brine. Some efforts had clearly gone into cleaning up what she could, but the thing had spent at least a few decades exposed to the elements after being destroyed.

Robin passed the trident to Tsunade, who looked it over before passing along.

“What are we looking at?” Yoruichi asked, turning the destroyed weapon in her hand for a bit before passing it to Scathach.

“That is the most recent artifact that we can reliably trace to Atlantis,” Robin explained. “Thanks to Melina’s psychometry, we know it was a standard-issue weapon for their soldiers. There are other artifacts, of course, but they are older. That is the last one to

wash ashore. Everything else is either not listed, not identified, or lost when Mikael 'Free'd the ocean of trash."

"Sorry," I said sheepishly.

I didn't want to feel garbage rubbing against me, and I figured it would be an excellent way to gain some goodwill with the local populace after the kerfuffle with the League. If I hadn't, we might have been able to find the remnants of Atlantis, gaining more information from either studying the ruins or talking to spirits.

"We had no way of knowing underwater civilizations had been wiped out and erased from memory," Robin reassured. "As an archeologist, I must acknowledge when knowledge is fully lost and try to piece together what is missing from what we do have. Case in point, what does the inscription on the handle say?"

"'Last sight,'" Emma answered easily before handing it off to Ranni. "Though it is faded and missing words in between."

"That's what I understood as well," Scathach nodded. "Though 'Last-Dying-Sight' would be more accurate."

"Diana?"

"You've already had me look at it," the Amazon instead passed the weapon over to Raven. "They are right; it can be read like that, but it's too worn out to say for certain. The conjugation is absent, so there are half a dozen ways to read it. What are you trying to show?"

"One moment," Robin said, stopping Raven from passing it to me. "Before looking at it, I want you to know that Ancient Greek, which this script is based on, had multiple dialects and rules depending on context. I know you studied Japanese and French, so I want you to look at it through a Japanese sentence structure."

"Sure," I said hesitantly, dredging old memories of fighting with Moonrunes.

TTPOV.

Topic. Time. Place. Object. Verb.

It was almost the complete opposite sentence structure of English, and the language was hugely context-based, so the topic was often left unsaid.

Focusing on those old lessons, I reached out for the broken trident.

I had no trouble finding the broken inscription and immediately understood what Robin was getting at.

"'End - death - seeing,'" I said to the room.

"And if the first word is a proper noun?" Robin asked with a smile.

I focused, trying to picture the lettering as if it was something like my name.

My vision didn't swim or anything, but suddenly, something clicked in my mind. My

brain automatically filled in the blanks in the words and translated them back into English for me.

"Seeing Omega is death."

"Exactly!" Robin exclaimed proudly.

"Mine pardon," Priscilla pipped up hesitantly. "But what is the significance of such a sentence?"

"The Greek letter 'Omega' is Darkseid's personal symbol, meaning 'the end.' It is also the symbol used to represent the Anti-Life Equation," I explained, looking over the inscription again. "In the original comic with the Equation, just seeing the symbol was enough to become enslaved, as it represented the whole Equation."

"It is also a common letter in the Greek alphabet," Diana argued. "Its presence on a soldier's inscription is not at all uncommon, and I felt nothing from seeing those letters."

"The Catalogue," I murmured contemplatively. "The Defences can protect us, but if something isn't directly targeting us, we won't sense it. Like when the gods were spying on me through a portal. I don't even notice half the time a psychic tries to pry into my mind because I always have Mind Defence going automatically. There are downsides to all its perks, aren't there? Even the most innocuous, like the languages."

"The ability to speak, read, and write any language is an incredible boon," Robin nodded with a grimace. "But languages are a microcosm of cultures. We do not actually gain knowledge of the culture. Native speakers of a language might hear us use an idiom that mentions a mythological figure we know nothing about."

"How did you figure that out?" Yoruichi asked curiously. "I never gave it much thought, but you all aren't speaking my language at all, are you?"

"Grail Knowledge would have allowed us to communicate even without the language translations, probably in English as it is the most common language of the group, but the Catalogue goes a step beyond and directly translates things to us in the language we are most comfortable with. As for how I figured it out? The Green."

"The Green speaks in experiences," Tsunade explained. "Because of the Catalogue, we could understand it, and it could understand our words, but its mind didn't connect 'words' with 'meaning.' It only had a point of reference with a psychic entity that does something similar like the Phoenix Force."

"They understand us perfectly, and we understand them as well, even jokes and puns, but when it comes to inorganic transmissions like writing, our brains have to interpret everything from what we are given," Robin continued. "If we have a full book or complete sentence, it's not an issue. We have enough context clues to piece together the information. We get the implied meaning even if we do not get certain references. But

with something fragmented and up to interpretation? Then we are left with our own biases to guide us."

"So this is the basis of your theory that it's Darkseid?" I asked, waving the broken weapon for emphasis. "It's a good base, but it doesn't answer the question. If he has the Anti-Life Equation, why hasn't he used it to bulldoze all opposition?"

"It just gave me the idea," Robin shook her head. "What if, like the inscription, we have been looking at the situation through the wrong lens?"

"What do you mean?"

"We have operated under the assumption that our enemy is a long-term planner working towards some grand conclusion. What if we were wrong?"

"If we believe that the Oppressor is the one behind the destruction of Atlantis, that was decades ago," Diana pointed out. "They would have to be a long-term planner to bide their time all this while."

"I don't mean they are not smart or plan things years in advance," Robin denied. "We can say with some certainty that they are the ones behind the destruction of Atlantis. Poseidon's odd behaviour and the destruction of the Clear both point to this fact. What I meant was that maybe the plan itself is the goal. What if the process is just as important, if not more so, than the result?"

"What are you getting at?" I asked directly, wanting to get on with it and gesturing at the trident again. "This could be the Anti-Life Equation itself, and we might not feel anything, but that's not what you are saying, is it?"

"Well, it might be, but I don't think so. I think it's a test. I think the entire fall of Atlantis was a test. One that failed."

"Tests?"

"What if our opponent is learning?"

A beat of silence.

"Learning?" Raven asked. "About us?"

"No. We aren't part of the plan at all," Robin denied emphatically. I couldn't help but admire how her eyes were alight with excitement at the mystery of it all. "What if they are learning about themselves? About their power? If we look at their actions like this, instead of all pointing towards some specific goal, then so much starts to line up."

"Like the Old Blood," I said with realization.

I had already suspected our enemy was manipulating various situations to experiment with the Old Blood and its abilities, and if so, it would fit this supposed MO.

"Exactly," Robin smiled proudly. "Our first known instant of it moving was Atlantis. Locked under the sea without easy rescue, it was an almost completely isolated first test.

But it failed somehow. Atlantis and The Clear were completely destroyed rather than controlled. If destruction was the goal, why not repeat the process? Instead, it backs off, biding its time. Then, years later, the Hand becomes much more active."

"How does The Hand fit into this theory," Yoruichi asked eagerly, getting into the spirit of things.

"More failed experiments," Tsunade explained. "Those who weren't destroyed but became mindless automatons—useful for grunt work and as agents but otherwise disposable. Orochimaru had something similar."

"Then the pattern changes again," Robin continued excitedly. "Suddenly, in 2011, the Endbringers show up. We know Shard-based powers have been around for way longer than that, so why then? It wasn't like the entities needed more conflict. There were already plenty of heroes and villains fighting. It is also around this time that the Divided and the Rythm fall to the Oppressor."

"Maybe that's when the Oppressor gained access to the entities?" I posited. "They were just laying there, weren't they? They crashed to a planet and were continuing the Cycle by instinct. That's why the Ancient One left them alone, and when Dr. Fate went to check on them, they were gone."

"The only source we have for the Ancient One's statement is Stephen Strange," Medea pointed out with eyes narrowed in suspicion. "We know he's been compromised. Who's to say that ever actually happened? Maybe they've never been braindead and are fully functioning and working for our enemy?"

I shivered at the idea but conceded the point.

"Whichever of those is true, we can agree that their behaviour changed again," Robin continued. "If we act on the belief that they are learning about their power, then it is around this time that they discovered the emotional component of their control. By inflicting specific emotions, they can enslave others but allow them to retain their full faculties. Useful lieutenants rather than useless soldiers. They use the Endbringers to cause these feelings of helplessness and fear."

"And then we show up," I nodded, following along. And the pattern changes again. I killed Simurgh. The illusion of invincibility is broken before they can infect all their targets, so they use Doomsday to try and bring that fear back. Darkseid would know about him. Maybe he was planning on using him as the Ultimate Endbringer—the masterpiece that, even if defeated, keeps returning stronger than ever. No hope allowed whatsoever."

"We stopped him," Artoria joined in. "Thus, our foe begins to see us as a viable threat."

"And it's still learning," Robin pointed out. "They know we can bring back the dead

by then but don't know we are immune to their control. So they pit us against something they think will be enough to stop the people who killed Doomsday."

"Trigon," Raven said lowly. "They didn't know I existed but made an excuse to have us fight him with the stolen books."

"By then, we had acted heroically twice," I nodded. "They'd probably have expected us to do so again."

"More than that," Diana shook her head. "They knew you hated being stolen from. One of the agents that tried to take one of your weapons was from the Hand, remember? They probably thought that, after Trigon was summoned, if we didn't confront him ourselves to save the world, all the Sorcerer Supreme would have to do was mention the stolen books, and we might have fought for that reason."

"No, wait." I shook my head, brain a mess of ideas and trains of thought. Robin and Tsunade were definitely on to something here. "They didn't even need to worry about that. Mini-Raven knew I was planning something against Trigon. I never Freed her because she was bait. The book thing might have just been a discarded plan after they found that out. It was stolen way before I revealed myself to Mini-Raven. It might not have been stolen, just given to the Hand."

"No matter what, so long as you confronted Trigon, they'd win something," Robin nodded. "His sons were trying to usurp him, right? If they succeeded, we can guess they were already under the enemy's control. If they failed, we'd be there to fight Trigon. And no matter who won, the damage would be huge enough to spread the infection. Maybe the loser would even be alive and feeling enough despair to be infected."

"The only way that plan would work was if whoever thought it up was supremely confident they could defeat Trigon the Terrible at the peak of his power if he won—or whoever beat him."

Grim faces nodded at Raven's words.

"But we unintentionally sidestepped the plan by not fighting at all," I said, trying to cheer them up. "Instead of throwing hands, we threw bants. And Pride got a snack and a smack."

I got a few smiles, but the mood was still dour.

Trigon was the largest threat of all the enemies I had faced so far. The gods could have been just as bad if they hadn't underestimated me so much. The Demon Lord, however, had taken me seriously from the start.

If I didn't have so much forwarning and so many hidden cards, I would have had to grab my Family and flee this dimension or use enough power that destroying the planet would be the least of my worries.

Anybody confident enough to take on peak Trigon was somebody I didn't want to tussle with without an equal amount of planning and traps.

"By doing so, we proved to be a threat to our enemy's plans," Robin nodded just as grimly. "But we were also an opportunity they needed to know more about how to use it effectively. Around this time, Sinister got his hands on the Old Blood."

"And Dr. Fate was spying on me with the gods," I agreed.

"That was the opportunity," Diana said softly. "Me. I'm a known entity. The Amazons would have been a thorn in our enemy's side if we are right. We were isolated from the world and peaceful despite our power. Soldiers who could be called upon that couldn't be infected easily."

"If I was confident to throw down with Trigon, I could take on the gods. Or at least, we'd distract each other long enough for them to do whatever they want to the divine pantheons. And while that's all going down, put the fear of the Endbringers back into the populace while wiping out the Amazons with Leviathan."

"They likely added the Leviathan part after the forced teleportation failed, and you left the gods and paradise in peace," Scathach pointed out. "And we foiled much of the impact of that attack by destroying the Endbringers relatively quickly."

"That is another reason I think it is Darkseid," Robin continued. "He's known to have killed gods for their powers before."

"And once he absconds with most of the powerful heroes, the earth is left defenceless," Diana muttered.

"So why continue to wait," I asked the room. "If you are right, the earth is at its most vulnerable right now."

"He still might be learning," Emma said. "As of now, the 'infection' requires the recipient to feel specific emotions. It is inefficient compared to a psychic attack, even if it is more complete. Or it could be us he's wary of."

"Maybe," I allowed. "That would fit with the idea it's Darkseid, though. He's sometimes defended the Earth, or at least ensured it survived, because he thinks humans are the key to the Anti-Life Equation. He could be pulling a Boss Dark Side again, though with the goal of finding the full Equation instead of using it to take ov-"

I froze, a memory rising to the surface thanks to revisiting events in chronological order and my earlier repetition of Death's question to myself.

That bitch.

She did it again.

What a stone-cold bitch.

I couldn't help but laugh.

The odd looks my wives were giving me just made me laugh harder.

"Has he finally snapped," Yoruichi 'whispered.' "If so, I get dibs on his room."

"Perhaps you can tell us what you find so funny," Diana asked, arms folded in displeasure.

Not at me, though. At the situation.

At the fact that it was absolutely Darkseid, and neither of us was happy about it.

"I'm an idiot."

"We know."

"Yep."

"You just realized?"

"Took you long enough."

"At least thou hast a beautiful voice."

"We still love you though."

"Our idiot."

"Our idiot with a great ass."

"I just hope it's not hereditary."

"His great ass?"

"His idiocy."

"T'is not, our Lord Husband's lunacy is infectious."

"We're doomed."

"Hey!"

"Mrow."

Et tu, Medea?

"What, specifically, are you an idiot about today?" Emma asked with a smile of her own.

"Well, it's definitely Darkseid," I sighed, giving Diana a commiserating look.

"I am glad you are on my side, but why the certainty," Robin raised a brow. "I still have questions myself, like why, if it is Darkseid, why so much effort to remain a secret when he could just control or kill those who discovered him? And why use Endbringers instead of his lieutenants? And how is he keeping track of everything? Even Emma and Ranni have trouble with so much multi-tasking for an hour, let alone decades."

"Honestly, I can't answer those questions either, though I have a few guesses on the latter. No, I am certain it's Darkseid because Death told me it was him."

"Unless you've conveniently forgotten about that until now," Raven drawled sarcastically. "I doubt she told you."

"Not exactly. She just pulled the same trick she did during the Deal," I said, shaking

my head with another laugh. “Remember the meeting I had with her?”

“The one where she laid out how she expected you to kill us as soon as you met us?” Emma asked dryly, getting dour looks from the rest of my wives. “I remember.”

“’I shall provide no help, no information,’” I quoted directly. “’Neither directly or indirectly. There is no Lady Death, Chosen of Death, Black Racer, or embodiment of my power. The closest is your bond, Priscilla, and she is far from an avatar of death yet. As of yesterday, no gods of death remain on this planet either. Everything, the good and the bad will depend on you. That is the only way you can grow. No one to blame, no one to thank.’”

“That bitch!”

“Ha,” I laughed again at Diana’s uncharacteristic swear. “That was my thought exactly.”

“Context, please,” Glynda sighed.

“It was the only way we managed to defeat Darkseid when he possessed the Anti-Life Equation,” Diana explained to the confused room, a stormy look on her face. “He was literally unkillable and as close to omnipotent as I had ever known him to be. We only beat him because Flash led the Black Racer, the physical embodiment of death for Speedforce users, to kill him after being chased through worlds and timelines.”

“What does this mean,” Emma asked.

“Just like she subtly warned me of the manipulation when making the Deal, she also warned me about Darkseid,” I shrugged with a smile. “I’d have no way of guessing by her words until we were fairly certain it was him, but now that we are, it’s her way of confirming it. She’s giving me a warning and an ultimatum. She lined things up so I’d awaken around now, which means that the Anti-Life Equation is either almost complete or already solved. And there will be no mcguffin, no Deus Ex Machina to solve the issue for us.”

“This is a dead-end world, isn’t it,” Raven muttered. “Like the ones we are from.”

“It has been since Darkseid set his sights on it,” I nodded gravely. “Maybe he could have been stopped if all the heroes of today banded together and pulled some shit, but he arrived decades before the heroic heyday. He’s been setting up the board for years, taking it slow instead of rushing in with his usual arrogance. The doom of most villains is not their lack of power but their lack of caution. And Darkseid has been very cautious.”

“Where does that leave us?” Artoria asked, looking at Diana. “We finally know our foe, but not their location or plans. We have hindered them and will continue to do so, but we are no closer to stopping them.”

“I don’t know,” the Amazon bit out. Then she sighed, looking at Robin and Tsunade.

“You convinced me. It’s Darkseid. But do you know his next step? What about the kidnapped heroes? Did The Green give anything else?”

“The Green’s only orders were to try and destroy Ciara and Priscilla,” Tsunade shook her head. “That, and consume Old Blood. We didn’t get anything else out of it of use.”

“Then we keep at it,” I eventually said when nobody else chimed in to give me ideas. “Keep buying time till Melina can wipe the Old Blood from the Earth. At that point, she and I might be able to contend with Darkseid if we work together. For now, no speaking of Darkseid or the Anti-Life Equation off the Island. You never know who is listening. He has no idea we are finally on to him, and I want to keep it that way. We see how he reacts to The Green’s loss and keeps dealing with the plague.”

Just because we knew our enemy didn’t mean all the old issues disappeared. Hell, even if we killed Darkseid, the Old Blood wouldn’t just die with him.

If we could kill him at all.

In the end, reality was not a comic book. You couldn’t just punch your problems away.

“What about Death?”

“What about Death?” I repeated Emma’s question.

“What are you going to do about her,” the mutant elaborated.

“Nothing,” I answered easily. “She’s Death. The End. I made the mistake of expecting her to act human exactly once. I haven’t since. No morality, no expectations. She’s on no one’s side. She’s upheld every part of the Deal so far, even if she’s not been exactly cool about it. Her little trick? It’s her way of saying we’re on our own. She won’t help or hinder us. I either pull something out of my ass, become Tier 11, run away, or die.”

We finally had a name, so I’d be content with that for today.

Darkseid, huh?

We were getting closer to a showdown, and as much as I was displeased that it was him, I couldn’t deny a part of me was a bit excited.

Would Darkseid be my next Wall?

It’s your move.

I hope you don’t disappoint me.

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Darkseid didn’t disappoint in scale if nothing else.

If one little planet’s governments weren’t enough, why not make me the enemy of the entire universe?

“Why not just throw the kitchen sink at me,” I muttered under my breath as I looked to the sky in my actual body.

My eyes, the size of a city, could see all the way to Mars without issue.

Usually, at least.

Right now, I could barely see the moon because all the armies in the universe had decided to park their battleships in my sky.

Well, fuck.

Author's Note:

To be honest, I am not happy with this one. There is too much exposition, and I had initially wanted to start the conclusion. I was all excited and everything. A short explanation, followed by action after action.

Then I realized something. It's been almost two years since I started this fic and a year and a half since the start of Volume 2. Some may have recently binged it, but I don't want to force that on those who have been with me since the beginning. On top of that, some may not be knowledgeable about comics and have no idea what's happening. Some of my readers saw this coming a while ago, but that's because they know the source material. I wouldn't inflict decades of comics on my worst enemy.

So, I slowed down a bit and put pen to paper (metaphorically) all the steps along the journey as both a refresher and an intro to a few subjects the casual reader of mine might not have a grasp of so they can understand better. Writing it was easy and not wholly devoid of story progression, so I have to be satisfied with that. If I had known I would end up doing this, I would have flushed out more of Dream 4 and combined them with parts of Dream 5. Ah, well, another sacrifice on the altar of serialized releases.

Since the beginning, I've been 'playing' as both Mikael and Darkseid. It has been fun, like a one-person DnD game. Many of my readers have complained about how the 'enemy' seems infallible, but I hope I've shown that it has been more of a back-and-forth. We've only seen Mikael's perspective, so we only see his thoughts, not our foes'.

On the subject of Darkseid, some might complain of his choice as 'big bad.' It's boring. It's uninspired. It's been done to death.

I agree.

But this fiction has never been about making something wholly new. It's fanfiction, after all. The entire premise is putting a spin on familiar characters and settings. I am not trying to reinvent the wheel. Just tell a compelling story.

I won't say more now; I just hope that even if you are sick of Darkseid, my depiction of the character is a little novel and interesting. More on that to come.

I will see you all next week.

Finale

OPPRESSION

“Oppression that is clearly inexorable and invincible does not give rise to revolt but to submission.”
-Simone Weil

Darkseid lost.

Uxas, God of Tyranny, Lord of Apokolips, conqueror of innumerable worlds and scourge of the multiverse.

Had lost.

Not once.

Not twice.

He had lost thrice.

Thrice had Darkseid been defeated.

Not set back, not rebuffed.

Lost.

The first time, it had been his plan.

A circumvention of an old prophecy.

Death was not final for him.

He returned from beyond, biding his time in secret upon a version of Earth as he studied humanity from the shadows, teasing fragments of the Anti-Life Equation from the suffering of mortals as he awaited the moment of vengeance.

Darkseid's second loss came upon his moment of triumph.

His trap had been set.

More powerful than ever, he had revelled in his dominance. His final victory.

The traitorous son. The hypocritical rival. The weak and pathetic.

They'd all fall before him as Darkseid grasped a fragment of reality and bent it to his will.

All Life was pointless before Darkseid.

Yet victory slipped through clenched fists.

The Last Son of Krypton.

That accursed nexus of fate and chance.

Darkseid's plans were repeatedly set back by mortals' fumblings as if the entire multiverse revolved around the heroic Kryptonian and his band of colourful peons.

The fragment of the Equation should have been more than enough to subjugate that world's version of the 'Justice League.' And it had.

But once more, some quirk or twist of luck had given the ants a chance to survive the boot.

One moment of inattention.

One slightly stronger fly.

And Darkseid lost a second time.

Killed once more by the traitorous Dog of War.

Tyranny never dies.

So long as hearts beat with the desire to dominate, to oppress, to control, and to subjugate, Tyranny will never die.

Darkseid would never die.

But Darkseid could lose.

Twice, he had lost. Twice, he had been reborn.

The third time, it was different.

Something broke.

Aware of Darkseid's plan, of his grasping a fragment of the Anti-Life Equation, his enemy had not given him time to form plans or learn more of the truth of Life.

No sooner had Darkseid reunited with his generals, the Elite who joined him beyond death, were they slain for a third time.

It was a terrible realization that confronted Darkseid at that moment of his third death.

He had been hunted. His soul's passage through the multiverse tracked.

Darkseid was prey.

His Elite realized it, too. They abandoned their Lord, their own rebirths scattered to the multiverse.

A sickening, wholly unfamiliar feeling overwhelmed the former Lord of Apokolips.

Darkseid would always return.

Alone.

Hunted.

Oppressed.

Darkseid returned in his fourth life, not in triumph, but in failure.

So wretched was Uxas that he was forced to hide on the edge of the multiverse in a reality mixed with the taint of chaos.

So far was Darkseid from the Fourth World, from the New Apokolips, that other realities bled over into this one. Only this confluence of chaos could hope to hide his fourth life from the ones hunting him.

It was that moment, that lowest, most pathetic moment of Darkseid's life, that the God

of Tyranny truly grasped the first fragment of the Anti-Life Equation.

This was Life.

This squalor. This wretchedness. This weakness. This mortality.

Darkseid knew pain, but he had never suffered.

Darkseid knew failure, but he had never entirely lost.

Darkseid knew death, but he had never felt the End.

Darkseid knew Tyranny but had never been oppressed.

His power. His privilege. His slaves.

It had all held him back.

Alone. Weak. Defeated.

Darkseid had never felt stronger.

From suffering would come power.

From power, more suffering would flow.

Such was the nature of Life.

At that moment, Darkseid started fusing with Anti-Life.

But he only grasped a fragment of the true Equation, one facet of innumerable others.

Darkseid needed time.

So he hid.

In the darkest edge of the multiverse, in the lowliest of worlds, a version of Earth bereft of all but the crudest civilizations, in the body of a powerless mortal on a world of powerless mortals, Darkseid hid.

And learned.

Darkseid learned of the struggle of the starving as his tribe cannibalized itself to survive a winter.

Darkseid learned of the killing power of simple wood, stone, and bone as his men and women were beaten, killed, raped, and enslaved by a larger group.

Darkseid learned of the elements' oppression as a few inches of rain loosened mud and smothered a burgeoning civilization in its cradle.

There was no reason to any of this pain and suffering. No point, greater purpose, or grand plan. There was no mastermind behind these events, no villain in the shadows. It was just Life.

From the vicissitudes of chance, Darkseid learned cruelty.

From his first weak cry as a mortal boy to his ceremonial crowning as king of mud huts and their lowly inhabitants, Darkseid learned of humanity.

Years passed. Decades.

A collection of mud huts turned into a kingdom that spanned thousands of miles.

Darkseid had done it all as the lowest of mortals.

Not even a hint of his prodigious powers leaked from him as he hid among the mud and squalor. He did not elevate his slaves with his knowledge of technology.

He simply ruled. Fought. Conquered. Dominated.

He had learned patience.

Why rush for the Anti-Life Equation?

Tyranny would always win in the end.

Darkseid would always win in the end.

So the Godking of one of the infinite earths ruled his mortal subjects with an iron fist.

Learning about Life.

Waiting for a moment of realization.

That moment came from the stars.

Everything he had built, every one of his people, all his effort and patience.

All pointless.

Everything was razed to the ground as two beings the size of continents chose his version of Earth as a hub.

Random chance. Bad luck. A turn of fate.

Whatever the reason, Darkseid didn't care as he grasped at ashes.

Two Entities undid it all.

They purged all life from the planet as they used it as one of a million nests from which to launch their shards across dimensions as they started another turn of their Cycle.

And Darkseid learned rage.

******

He was weak.

So weak.

Dying three times was not without costs, and he had spent no effort recovering from those injuries during his time as a mortal.

Darkseid, Lord of Apokolips, was weaker than ever before.

It was more than enough to crush two Worms.

They were creatures that existed across dimensions, parts blending in and out of facets of reality as they scattered and recombined their pieces through a small fraction of the multiverse.

Their destruction of his version of Earth was but one of countless others.

Their initial attack tore apart his mortal shell, the energies alone rendering it into

pulp, then atoms, and then nothing, as even those were scattered to the dimensional winds.

And did nothing to the evil it contained.

The attacks stopped as the entities beheld Darkseid.

Limited creatures that they were, they could not comprehend his existence.

He beheld their forms in turn. He saw them for what they were, multi-dimensional or not.

They were worms, the most basic and pathetic of species, who learned to manipulate the fabric of space but had discarded almost all greater potential for their lowly ability to wriggle through the folds between dimensions.

Darkseid sneered.

And punched.

He was so weak that only half the continent cracked in every dimension these worms inhabited.

These pathetic creatures were not without a few means, however. Their bodies were frozen in a temporal/spatial field that nullified most of the blow's power.

Darkseid punched again.

Time/space shattered.

The crust of the planet ruptured.

Half of one of these worms was rendered into a pulp of blood, crystal, and metal. It reformed, but less. It was lacking. Parts had been lost.

The other counter-attacked, a stinging sensation in Darkseid's chest the only mark of a blow that should have pierced dimensions.

A lesser being would have been unmade, the blow scattering them across space as everything narrowed into a point that pierced through the layers of reality.

Darkseid's rage rose as he noticed the tiniest of blemishes on his skin.

It immediately healed, but the fact that he had been wounded by such creatures reminded the tyrant of his weakness.

Their greatest attack, having failed, the worms tried to flee.

As if he'd let them.

Darkseid shattered their bodies as they tried to fly.

He tore their portals apart.

He crushed the parts they tried to jettison as distractions.

It would be easy to kill the Worms. Lessened as he was, Darkseid was still a being so far above these creatures that they were simply incapable of comprehending the difference in the nature of their existence.

Their bodies might be the size of planets, stretching across realities to accommodate their mass.

Their abilities might be many and varied, ranging from physical, spatial, or technological.

They might be in their prime while he is reduced to a shadow of his former might.

It didn't matter.

He was Darkseid.

If one reality couldn't contain his might?

Darkseid forced it to.

Why would he need varied abilities?

Darkseid disdained the use of things like the Speedforce or the rings of the Oans.

Their greatest peak would not reach the toe of his weakest moment.

Method after method to flee was crushed.

Attack after attack was dismissed.

Darkseid tore them apart piece by piece and scattered their remains over the multiverse.

Slowly but surely, he ground them down until no hope remained.

Inquiry.

"You do not get to talk."

He ripped a crystalline tower the size of a mountain from the back of one and impaled the other with it.

Inquiry.

"You do not get to question."

Space shattered as he crushed a proboscis-like tendril as long as a moon and thinner than an atom under his foot.

Plea.

"You do not get to beg."

An explosion, large enough to burn a planet bare, engulfed his body. He wasn't even singed.

Plea.

"You do not get to die."

They tried to flee once more, compression space around them to create a black hole to trap him as they fled the dimension and dilated their relative time.

"All you are allowed to do is suffer." He crushed the singularity in his palm. "Such is the will of Darkseid!"

The Worms froze as he attacked them once more, not with his fists but with his mind.

Their mental abilities were even more pathetic than their physical ones.

These things were barely sapient, their sense of self so low that even the most basic emotions were lost on them.

But they'd learn.

Darkseid had no need to relearn how to inflict pain. He was already a master of the art.

Weak as the Worms were to the most basic of psychic attacks, Darkseid tore their primitive minds to shreds as he rampaged through them, leaving only enough intact so they would continue to suffer.

Yet it wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

Any who would defy Darkseid would become monuments to pain and torment.

So, in a delicious twist of irony, he trapped them in their own Cycle.

All the data was there. All the remnants of civilizations and peoples they had consumed as they spiralled across the multiverse. The remnants of the hosts of their trillions upon trillions of shards was all imprinted in their memory.

A data bank of suffering, waiting to be used.

Time after time, Darkseid forced these wretched creatures to live through the lives they had consumed.

Initially, these creatures did not understand or care. It was all data, numbers and inputs that had no relation to them.

Darkseid forced them to understand.

Pain inflicted in memory was inflicted in reality.

Darkseid forced them to care.

Pain and loss were inflicted on the other when a memory called upon emotions.

These animalistic creatures did not understand emotion but understood the need to breed and grow. They knew they could not do so alone. Their entire existence was wrapped in each other.

Even the lowliest of beasts understands loneliness is to be avoided.

Life needed Life

Darkseid trapped these Worms in their primitive minds and forced them to grow, to evolve, to *feel*.

And from those feelings, he tortured them.

Even as he completely rewrote their existence to be one of pain, loss, and suffering, Darkseid did not feel satisfied.

Their pain would never be enough.

He'd eventually grasp the Anti-Life Equation, but all who slowed his march forward would be ground down like the bugs they were.

It was in a moment of lucidity when Darkseid allowed the creatures to emerge from the traps of their minds so they might realize their suffering before trapping them again that the inspiration struck.

One of the creatures, the one dedicated to combat, reached out to the other. Not physically, but through their primitive method of communication.

Not for information or a plan of escape but for validation. For reassurance that its partner still lived.

For confirmation that it wasn't alone.

It had learned to care.

At that moment, Darkseid realized another part of the Equation.

Life needed Life.

Life needed to care—about itself, about the world around it, about threats. But caring led to loss, for nothing was permanent.

The most selfish of beings, who only cared about their own wants and desires, still cared. And when it faced the loss of itself? When confronted by its own impermanence? Would that not also be the greatest of pains? Just as a mother loses a child? Or a lover loses a lover?

It was all about investing oneself, in investing one's Life, into something.

Had he not cared about his experiment? At the effort and time he expended? He would not feel this rage at its loss if he hadn't.

What if he had known this was how it would end? Pointlessly at the hands of two lowly Worms? Would he have cared?

No.

Why care at all?

Life needed Life.

Life needed to care about Life.

All that Life cared about would disappear.

And that disappearance, that loss, was the most profound of suffering.

That juxtaposition.

That pointlessness.

It was a fundamental part of the world.

To live was to care.

To care was to lose.

To lose is to suffer.

Any Anti-Life Equation needed to incorporate this principle.

Darkseid needed to continue his experiment, seizing upon this new lesson. He now had enough fragments that he felt it was time to test them actively.

And now he had two new slaves to help him carry out his whims.

He could be a bit more daring, though he needed to remain unnoticed in this chaotic section of the multiverse.

Darkseid had learned patience, after all.

Until the Equation was complete, he would not step out to claim his place.

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Darkseid didn't even bother to sneer at the simpering mortals that grovelled at his feet.

What did he care for their pleas?

With a flex of his mind, the silver figure on his right tore the Atlantean to pieces.

Even after all this time, the Worms remained susceptible to mental controls.

At least their avatars and pets were useful as minions.

"Those who do not fight, do not eat," Darkseid ordered.

He didn't care that the throne room was covered in blood and viscera. Not a day hadn't gone by without someone dying in this room since he had slaughtered this world's version of Aquaman and his family.

It had been cathartic, to say the least. It was a shame a version of the Kryptonian hadn't appeared on this world yet. Darkseid was looking forward to that immensely.

And what do you know, Atlantis had made the perfect test bed.

It lacked the sheer number of test slaves of his previous experimental areas, but it made up for it in other facets. The stronger slaves and their ability to use magic, for one.

That and another benefit made this slightly riskier testbed a worthwhile investment. Besides, the risk was mitigated by Atalantis' isolation from the rest of the planet. When anyone learned of its destruction, Darkseid would be in another reality.

If this round of experiments failed, that is.

"But my Lord," one of the slaves gathered the courage to speak up. "The childr-"

Her blood joined the other's.

"Fight or die. No exceptions. Do you want your child to eat? Fight twice."

He wasn't trying to set up a long-term base here. The only reason he hadn't killed the children already was because it made their parents fight all the harder.

His pits had seen some results.

Armed with weapons bearing various iterations of the Equation, he pitted the Atlanteans against each other to mixed results.

The despair of killing off those you know and love. The loss of a parent, sibling, child, or friend.

Seeing so many examples of caring, loss, and its pointlessness led to refining the Equation.

The most tremendous success so far had been a version of the Anti-Life Equation that, upon seeing it, would drive those slaves of weaker wills to suicide.

A useful weapon but suboptimal.

If Darkseid sought to destroy everything, he would have already succeeded.

He sought a greater prize.

Domination.

The true Anti-Life Equation he theorized to exist would be one that would render even death pointless. Only complete submission of one's Life would be a way to escape.

All would live.

All would be Darkseid.

But this experiment had run its course.

It had been fun, but lingering in a world too long, even one as bastardized as this, ran too much of a risk of being discovered if he remained in his true body.

Still, before he left, Darkseid would squeeze one more morsel of benefit from this world.

And it had been so long since he had preyed on a genuine god.

Even if it was only a fraction of a fraction of his true might, Darkseid was looking forward to healing some of his wounds and regaining his power.

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Darkseid idly thumbed a broken prong of metal as he looked upon the husk of a sea god, completely drained of all power.

The Worms continued to disappoint, utterly unable to deal with magic or divinity. It put a halt to further plans of hunting gods to absorb their powers, at least for the moment.

Darkseid would win any fight, of course. He knew how to hide, manipulate, kill, and consume gods. They were predictable in ways mortals were not.

But the conflict would attract attention he did not want as he continued to grasp for the Equation.

And that was why he was still in this reality, instead of leaving the drained god and

the ruined Atlantis.

The Equation.

The ambush had provided an insight, on top of healing a portion of his spiritual wounds.

Hope.

The Atlantians had seen their god appear. They had known a part of the ambush had failed.

Their entire city had turned to rubble, half of them dying in the chaos, yet they dared to feel hope.

Darkseid had long believed hope to factor into the Equation somehow, but the realization came when he felt his test equations take hold, not when the god was slain but before.

It was not the loss of hope, as he had expected, that was part of the Equation.

That was his mistake.

Hope was essential for survival. It was the aspiration of Life, the desire for a better tomorrow for oneself or one's progeny.

The loss of hope would not lead to submission but death.

No, hope was essential, yet any who possessed it would not submit, for they would hope for escape, freedom, or survival.

A paradox his Anti-Life Equation needed to take into account.

To hope yet not hope.

The answer came to Darkseid as he thought of the symbol of hope he knew.

Superman.

A hero.

Heroes were the answer.

When you were at your lowest, did you not hope for salvation. For a hand to reach down from the heavens and save you?

Was that not the quintessential manifestation of hope?

Were those saved, not those who entrusted their very lives to heroes? Was that not also a form of total submission?

Everything they were, everything they cared about, all their hopes and dreams, everything was in the hands of those they pleaded to save them.

They, the hopeful hopeless, those who could not save themselves and had to beg chance, fate, or others for salvation, were they even alive at that point?

That was how one lived while not being alive.

Submitting everything to another.

That realization came with a downside, though.

Darkseid looked at what remained of the Atlantians.

Less than a hundred living beings stood there, on the sea bed, in the remains of a once great city.

Man or woman, old or young, injured or whole, they were all different. The only commonality between them was their listless, one could say lifeless, eyes and blank expressions.

All of them were under the control of Darkseid.

A success.

With but a thought, they descended on each other.

Husband strangled wife. Child impaled parent. Comrade fought comrade.

Atlantis died when, with the same blank face as when the fighting began, the last survivor took a fragment of her god's trident and stabbed herself through the eye.

Complete submission.

Yet it was a failure.

His order had been to kill each other till nobody was left.

Yet the soldiers had not reached for weapons they didn't already possess and had not used any martial skill they should have possessed. The magicians cast no spell, though it would have sped up the process. They did not organize a culling, where half would kill each other and repeat the process until nobody was left.

It was an inefficient, chaotic melee with no higher thought behind it.

Slaves like that were useless.

They were slaves, yes, but Darkseid didn't need slaves like them. It would be like having a useless limb. They would only get in the way.

But it was enough for a base of a plan.

The world of this Atlantis was in its infancy regarding heroes. It was one of the reasons Darkseid had felt confident in remaining hidden.

Darkseid knew how realities like this worked. It would only take a few sparks, a couple of fools in colourful costumes, to herald a rising tide of power.

At the moment, a few dozen 'Supers' roamed the world openly, but that number would be ten times greater in fifty years. Power drew power to it. To rise with or against it.

And, looking at the gold and silver avatars beside him, Darkseid knew he could help that growth along.

This world was already at the border of the multiverse, where other parts of the omniverse blended together in a chaotic melange. If he mixed things up even more, this entire planet could be a wonderful place to study this newest fragment of the Equation.

He'd spread his Equations, hidden in words and minds, testing and refining his process as this world grew more and more powerful.

The failures, the mindless slaves, would be tools he used while remaining hidden. A few abilities from the Worms would make even the mindless useful.

Those who were useful, he'd keep the Equation in their subconscious without activating. That would let them grow their abilities and power without issue. It would be a back door for the Worms to use their own limited mental abilities on even the most resistant.

One day, the Anti-Life Equation would do it all, but a patchwork job would have to suffice for now.

Once he had an army large enough and useful enough, he'd throw them against the gods of this world and heal his injuries completely with their divinity.

Trapping one Olympian had almost ended in failure. He wasn't ready to take on the likes of Zeus or Odin yet.

******

This was... new.

Which was noteworthy.

Not much was new in the multiverse for Darkseid, but the white dragon was an unknown.

More than that, it was a disruption in the plan.

Darkseid had released the Worm's pets when the world was strong enough.

The 'Endbringers,' as the peons called them, were a way of inflicting enough despair that even heroes begged to be saved, entrusting their Life to others.

To lose the Simurgh, his favourite, was a setback. Half the reason he expended the effort he did to keep them alive was to cultivate their mythos as 'invincible.' Beings to be fought against but never defeated. He wanted to test if such a belief might affect the Equation.

Odder still was that none of the abilities that should have saved the Endbringer worked on the white dragon.

It seemed to be immune to mental, temporal, or predictive interference, at least to some degree.

Interesting.

It bore study. If only for its novelty.

Darkseid had the Avatars of the Divided and the Metal spy on the dragon. Their

unique connection to the Parliaments of this Earth made them much more helpful than the mindless slaves of the Equation.

Darkseid turned his attention to resolving the loss of the Simurgh and the reputation it represented. He was still about a decade away from being able to claim with absolute certainty that he could assault the gods of this world without sending ripples throughout the multiverse.

It may be time to test his improvements on The Ultimate.

Seeing the realities where the Kryptonian was slain by a prehistoric version of his own people was a pleasure. And the loss of Superman would instill a different kind of despair in the world.

Even if you kill an Endbringer, it would only call forth an even greater calamity as punishment.

And, once he gained control of the Parliament of Decay, he'd be able to bring back the spectre of Superman as a tribute.

******

This was... concerning.

Not the dragon, the 'Elden Lord's power, though the slaying of The Ultimate was relatively noteworthy. Bringing back the dead was easy enough for those with the right knowledge, as was connecting the Worms with the 'Endbringers.'

No, it was his knowledge and immunity from influence.

So many times had he and his 'family' been subjected to representations of the Anti-Life Equation, yet not one had been infected. As the controller of the Equation, he always felt all who were connected. It wasn't that they hadn't yet felt the needed emotions to fall under his sway. They simply did not even acknowledge its existence.

Yet that was a silver lining because this 'Mikael' was also a multiverse-level being.

Not only did his entourage hold a version of the Amazon, but he possessed knowledge from other realities. There was a very high likelihood he knew of Darkseid and those who hunted him.

Darkseid was not ready for that fight yet. His experiments were still ongoing. He was close, so close.

Even if he died again, it would only be a setback, but there was no reason to risk it so close to completion.

So Darkseid hid even deeper, in another reality altogether and operated his experiments through his four useful slaves and countless mindless minions.

And he set the Elden Lord on course to interfere with Trigon's little prophecy while manipulating Dr. Fate to gain the gods' attention.

Either Trigon would kill the dragon, erasing the problem, only to be rebuffed by the Council of Skyfathers, or the dragon would manage to fight him off, revealing more of his cards.

Darkseid didn't believe for a second that those idiot sons of the devil would succeed in their attempt to overthrow their father. They were nothing but instigators meant to pit the Elden Lord against Trigon.

No matter what, Darkseid would win in the end.

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This was starting to become an enjoyable pastime.

The Elden Lord wasn't dumb. He had managed to trick not only Trigon but Darkseid as well.

How many other wives was he keeping hidden? Or other cards? What of that blue moon? Was it more than just a divine symbol?

So many questions. So many opportunities.

Maybe the Elden Lord was key to pulling his plans forward by years.

... Yes. There was an idea.

Already, Sublime was discovering so much through its agents on the island. A few samples of the fascinating blood the Elden Lord had mentioned would not go amiss while Darkseid set everything up.

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"You... won't... wi-"

Athena never finished her sentence as she was drained dry, her divinity restoring Darkseid a little bit more.

"Poseidon said the same thing."

With a careless toss, Darkseid dropped the carcass to the ground.

"So did Isis."

Hera's eyes blankly stared sightlessly at the sky as he stepped over her.

His foot crushed Hephastus' skull.

"As did Amatarasu, Anansi, Durga, and so many others."

Decades ahead of schedule, Darkseid was whole.

Even without the quality of power from the Skyfathers, the Earthmothers and lesser gods made up for it with their quantity.

Darkseid hoped they dealt with the Elden Lord quickly. He looked forward to their looks of despair when they returned to their realms and found all they cared for ruined.

Still, that was for later.

Best enjoy this moment now.

"They spoke the truth," Hestia said, her voice not hinting at the agony she must feel from lacking all limbs. "You shall not win. Someone will stop you."

Darkseid loomed over the last Olympian, relishing the moment.

His assault on the divine realms had been a blitz, not giving anyone time to contact each other or teleport away. A necessity as he never knew when the Skyfathers would finish and return.

He wanted to be whole to greet them, with his rituals set up to stop fluctuations echoing through the multiverse.

After all, it was far from the first time he had hunted gods.

Still, he hadn't had time to enjoy the moment of victory. Of being whole and powerful after almost a century of weakness.

"Yet here I am." Darkseid crushed Demeter's torso to a pulp for emphasis, relishing the pain in the goddess' eyes. "I am waiting for your leaders. No god can save you. No hero. There will be no one to avenge you."

The Elden Lord would be killed by the Skyfathers, and his wives succumb to despair at his loss, giving Darkseid more slaves.

The world, ruined by the 'Endbringers,' would spiral further and further towards helpless submission as he continued to run his experiments.

His next step was to gain access to Asgard. Odin had bought some time by incapacitating his people and catching on to Thor's infection, but this only delayed the inevitable.

Eventually, the one-eyed god would need to emerge and Darkseid would be waiting.

"So long as evil exists, so will justice," Hestia said, defiant to the end.

"I hope so. Heroes are so very useful."

Heroes made the best slaves.

Hestia's defiance ended when his hand pierced her chest, claiming more power for himself.

He would have preferred to leave these gods alive if it weren't for the need to heal his weakness.

Death was so final.

Submission to Darkseid was the only way for others to exist.

The inevitable end of all Life.

Even the Elden Lord, immune to mental control, still served Darkseid till his end.

As he was setting up the ritual for his final confrontation with the Skyfathers, Darkseid's world changed.

Freedom.

Complete Freedom.

He was Free.

Connections. Morality. Consequences. Time. Space. Reality. The multiverse itself.

He was Free of them all.

He was Free of all limits.

He was utterly alone.

Darkseid.

The only Free Life in existence.

Everything and everyone else was inconsequential.

They were all bound. Limited.

Slaves to their reality, their feelings, their bodies, their omni-verses.

Unlike Darkseid.

Darkseid was Free.

And then the moment was over.

Once more, he was limited.

For the first time in his eternal life, Darkseid felt like a slave.

For the first time in his eternal life, Darkseid felt Heartbreak.

In that moment of complete loss, even greater than his third death, Darkseid completed the Anti-Life Equation.

It was decades before he would have if Mikael had never existed in this section of reality.

All that remained was to wrap up a few experiments to create more powerful slaves and lay out the trap.

For one final time, the Elden Lord would serve Darkseid.

Author's Note:

Sorry for both the late and shorter chapter. I've been sick since Monday, and I've been lying in bed.

Fun fact, being immunocompromized sucks. A regular cold can turn much worse in a matter of minutes. I could barely get this out while my head felt like Medea was sitting on it (And not the witch.)

While this chapter is short, it is dense. I hope that makes up for it a bit. There are three or four more chapters till the end, depending on how things play out. I will see you all next week.

... I'm going to bed.

LONELINESS

"No man is free who is not master of himself."
-Epictetus

"You know that thing?"

"What thing?"

"That thing that's happened a few times now? That thing where I haven't told you all something, either because it hasn't come up, I haven't thought of it, didn't think it would be important, or I wanted to look cool and deal with it by myself?"

"Yes," Melina deadpaned at me. "We know that thing."

"This is not that thing."

Man, the way my wives were eyeing me did not inspire me with confidence.

Most, like Melina, simply looked unimpressed but unsurprised.

Others, like Diana or Artoria, looked reproachful but not angry, as if they had come home to find the dog had destroyed the furniture.

Priscilla was the worst. She looked so innocently supportive as if she would side with me even though I was to blame.

"This is definitely that thing," Yoruichi just enjoyed watching me squirm.

"This is not that thing," I denied again. "I have no idea why there are thousands of spaceships surrounding Earth."

"Really," Diana said. It wasn't a question, despite being framed as one. She clearly didn't believe in my obvious innocence. "No idea? You have no clue why half the known universe has some form of weapon pointed at us?"

"I really, really don't."

"You didn't inadvertently seduce another sapient force of nature?" Melina asked blankly.

"That only happened once!"

"Maybe he seduced their princesses? Or queens?" Robin asked, clearly hopping on the bandwagon.

"That only happened-" I paused, looking around the room to do a quick count. "Melina, do you count as a princess?" I winced in sympathy at the strength of Melina's facepalm. "Ok, that only happened a dozen times. Fifteen max."

"How did you get to a dozen?" Scathach asked curiously.

"Most of you come from a distinguished lineage of some sort, so I count them even if

not royalty. Glynda and Robin are the exceptions, and I also don't count Emma 'cause she was just rich, not actual nobility, even if the difference is minute."

"That's only ten."

"Eleven. Medea is Queen of Floofs. Isn't that right, you big tub of lard? You are the leader of all floofs, aren't you? Who's the Queen of Chonky Cats? You are. Yes, you are."

"Mrow."

"Then whose the twelfth?"

"I think Hippolyta has a thing for me, but I could just be reading into it."

"WHAT!"

"Nothing happened," I rolled my eyes at Diana's surprise. "It was just a feeling I got—a bit of tension between us. For all I know, she could just be pent up. It could be something else. Besides, I have no intention of cheating on my wives with an alternate-dimensional version of her mom… There's a sentence I never thought I'd have to say."

I pretended not to know the idea probably turned the Amazon on slightly due to her corruption fetish. As I said, I had no plans to pursue that train of thought. Fetishes were great for the bedroom, but living your life being led around by your dick was a great way to get it chopped off.

"And the fifteen?" Robin asked with an amused smile.

"Margin of error," I shrugged. "Maybe some princess I don't know about fell in love with me at first sight. Princesses are silly creatures, and I am a devilishly handsome dragon. Our kinds are famous for going together well."

"…So he didn't seduce anyone." "HEY!" "Did you kill someone you shouldn't have?"

I ignored my desire to needle Yoruichi back for that comment and seriously considered the question.

"I honestly don't think so," I admitted after a moment. "I've barely killed anything since leaving my prison. A few ships tried to attack me while we flew toward Earth, but Ranni dealt with those, and they were random scrubs that just happened to get in the way."

"T'were no one of import," Ranni concurred.

"What about while you were floating in space, like with the Phoenix Force," Glynda suggested.

"I was practically a saint while I Dreamed," I snorted. "If any ships or individual got close, I just nudged them away and used the Dream to scramble their memories and records of finding us. If I went around killing people, I was bound to attract attention I didn't want from all sorts of people I couldn't deal with before I had the Defences. A Celestial passed by once, and I nearly shit myself. I was barely twenty thousand years old

at that point, not even a kilometre long. I was so baby."

"There's an image I don't need," Tsunade wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Hey," I shrugged. "We'll be dealing with diapers soon enough. Best get used to the idea."

"Could it be because of Gladiator," Artoria suggested. "He was the leader of the Shi'ar, was he not? And he disappeared here."

"I don't think so," Diana denied, finally recovering from the idea of me possibly boinking a version of her mom. "While a few of those warships are Shi'ar, there are also Thanagarian ships, and they just finished settling a war."

"I think I recognize a Kree design and one from the Skrull Empire from comics," I pointed out. "Those two famously hate each other. I can't imagine them putting aside their differences for Gladiator, though I could be wrong. Emma or Valeria would know more."

"Speaking of the Ice Queen," Yoruichi said, looking at Raven. "Where is she?"

"Dealing with Frost," the Demon Lord said blankly.

There was another reason I wasn't so set on 'expanding the Family' as it were. Already, Emma's plans with Frost were spiralling out of control.

I had let this whole 'romance experiment' go on long enough, reluctant to cut off the woman because of how much it meant to Emma and how helpful Frost was with Priscilla's dreams.

But she had recently crossed my bottom line.

With Darkseid waiting in the wings, half the world governments calling me Dragon Satan, the ongoing Bloodplague, and now whatever this space invader bullshit was, I really couldn't have one of my most useful wives babysitting her pet project.

"So what did you do to have the entire universe decide to ally with historic enemies to kill you?" Medea asked, bringing us back full circle.

I sighed.

"I am innocent," I repeated. "It's probably a plan by Darkseid, though I have no idea what he wants with this. All those battleships aren't doing anything but hovering there ominously with lasers pointed at us. And this isn't like the nations of Earth declaring war. Since these guys are outside the atmosphere, I can just use my true body to blow them all up without issue."

"It is probably the enemy's plan," Diana nodded. "Maybe another test to gain the Anti-Life Equation? Pitting humanity against the universe?"

"Even if it is, you definitely did something to provoke them," Yoruichi said with a sly smile. I was about to protest my innocence again when she continued. "Let's be honest here. What are the odds that you are completely uninvolved in a large incident? How

many times has that happened since the Dream ended?"

I shut my mouth with a click.

I absolutely hated being accused of things I didn't do. It was a pet peeve of mine. Usually, if someone continued to insist something was my fault that wasn't, I'd start tearing them a new one, like I had with the X-men and the whole 'kidnapped baby' thing.

The only reason I hadn't gotten mad at my wives for their accusations was because I was also unsure if I had done something that led to this spatial blockade.

I didn't think I did. I honestly can't think of anything that would offend this many intergalactic factions.

But at the same time, I couldn't say it was impossible.

What was that old Ian Flemming quote?

'Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action. Five times is your own damn fault.'

…Or something like that.

"I genuinely cannot say with a hundred percent certainty that I am not involved," I sighed with a grimace. "But I really have no clue what it could be."

"We won't find out just by standing here talking," Artoria decided. "Even if this is a trap by our enemy since we cannot dismantle it, we must break it."

"Should I just blow them all up?" I asked, rubbing my chin. "They're warships, so I won't feel bad by killing everyone on board. However, it might lead to reprisals against Earth by the other factions. And if they weren't here for me before, they definitely will be after me after I destroy a few million warships in ten minutes."

"Let me talk to Bruce," Diana said with a grimace at the idea of slaughtering tens of millions of sapient beings, even if they were pointing lasers at our heads. "He might know why they are here."

"I shall start spreading eyes and ears," Robin nodded in agreement. "It will be a while as I still need a visual. Raven, can I borrow one of your clones for transport?"

"Take Happyness," the demoness said as a miniature pink version of her appeared on the former pirate's shoulder.

"I'll talk with Valeria," Melina suggested. "Reed Richards is held in high regard by the large factions. She might know something because of her disguise."

"I'll grab Emma then," I nodded. "Two seals should give her enough power to reach most of the ships, and so long as they have a biological brain or the equivalent, she can start parsing through minds. Raven, how many Command Seals would it take for you to fully cover the world in your Shadows if we need to protect it."

"…Only one or two," she answered after a moment of thought. "I am still practicing

with Trigon's power in my shadow world. I believe I have enough power already, but the control for something like that for more than a second is still beyond me. If you use the seal to increase my control, I should be able to keep it enshrouded for a few hours. Twice that if you use one seal for me and another for Pride."

"Mine Order is already encompassing this planet," Ranni added. "Should thee need to further protect this world, Lord Husband need only Command a use of mine Semblance, and it shall be encompassed in mine Diorama."

"Or you can use a few on the rest of us to help with the attack," Scathach offered with a bloodthirsty smirk.

"We have options," I nodded, a rough battle plan already sketching in my mind.

Base defence was much more complicated and difficult than a straight fight, but my Command Seals regenerated daily, so expending a few was good sense, even if they were a limited resource.

"For now, let's see if we can try the diplomatic approach before we make more enemies," I shook my head. "I'll keep watching with my real body, so be prepared, but we can act like usual until the situation changes. They look like they are waiting for something, too."

A rough plan was established, and we separated into our individual tasks.

I was off to tell a twin of my hot wife that I wouldn't sleep with her because she simultaneously was too crazy, not crazy enough, and the wrong kind of crazy.

…Man, I was a terrible Harem Protagonist.

Life would be so much easier if I just thought with my dick.

******

"I warned you. Over and over again, I warned you. So why did you do it?"

"You don't understand," Emma Frost scowled at the 'White Queen' from behind her desk. "You can't understand."

"You're right," the Bitch nodded, her smirk taking on a mocking tone. "I can't understand why you'd be so dumb. We had a plan."

"A plan that isn't working," Emma snarled, unwilling to be talked down to in her office. "Months of work. Tens of millions of dollars. A complete destruction of my public image. And for what? A thank you and a handshake."

The Bitch dared to scoff.

"We both know you will make ten times the cost in tours and album sales. And your image? Everyone on the planet knows Emma Frost now. As far as most are concerned,

you're the closest woman to gaining immortality and infinite power. Even if we were to fail, your political power has never been greater. But we weren't failing."

"We were-"

"We were taking it slow," the Bitch interrupted with a sneer. "Laying a foundation. I told you it would take years since we first started. Mikael does not fall in love easily. It takes time. We had a plan. You had everything to gain. Everything! And you threw it away!"

"I did not!" Emma slammed her hand on her desk and rose to her feet to meet the other Emma Frost's eyes at eye level. "I have done everything asked of me." "And benefited from it all." "I have spared no expense on your Family's every whim. And when I wanted something in return? Something given out for free to millions of people every day? Something that would let me feel Him again? I get this response!"

"Oh, poor Emma Frost," the Bitch sneered mockingly. "Poor little princess didn't get instant gratification. She couldn't seduce a man with a flash of her fake breasts. She had to put in work and time to get immortality and power. And when it took too long, her shiny little brain decided it was a good idea to act like a drugged-up little slut getting her fix."

Emma felt so much rage, so much hate, staring at this woman, this twisted mockery of herself.

All she wanted to do was rip this bitch's mind to pieces, to tear every fibre of her being to shreds.

Three things stayed her hand.

The first was the fact that she would unequivocally lose. They both had psychic abilities roughly on par, but the White Queen was entirely immune to mental attacks. While Emma had confidence in her mental defences to hold off the fake for a time, she had no such confidence in the physical confrontation.

The second reason was that victory would not gain Emma any satisfaction beyond the feeling of carving the Bitch's skull in. She would just be resurrected by Him, and all Emma's hopes for the future would come crashing down.

The final reason was the look in the White Queen's eyes.

Emma knew herself. She knew who she was, what she wanted, and what she looked like in every expression she ever made.

Never, not once, had she looked at anything like this version of Emma Frost was looking at her.

So much hatred. So much disgust.

The Blood gave her another flash of Insight.

This wasn't just anger at Emma infecting herself and using the cure as an excuse to

feel His power. It was more profound, more primal.

Emma Frost, the Bitch, was looking at her as if her very existence was an affront she couldn't tolerate.

Emma wasn't just a bug to this woman. She was her anti-thesis, everything she stood against.

The moment Emma gave this dragon of diamond an excuse, she wouldn't just kill Emma.

She'd erase Emma from existence.

Every memory of her would be wiped from reality. Every digital file would be deleted. Every written record would be cursed by a witch to burn. She'd have someone destroy her very soul.

Emma Frost would be wiped from every fabric of this universe.

As soon as Emma gave her the excuse.

And the moment was over, leaving Emma very much aware of how delicate her situation was.

She was standing against someone with her every ability, but better, who could call upon allies that Emma had no hope of matching.

Was this really a version of herself?

Or was that a lie used to string her along for her Family's benefit?

Emma's actions did not deserve this kind of hatred, not when all she wanted to do was feel a fraction of a fraction of the Love this woman experienced every day.

She had hurt no one. The only one at risk was herself. Only her resources had been spent.

It was not fair.

It just wasn't fair.

She wasn't any worse than this woman.

Didn't Emma deserve to be Loved?

"Nothing to say?" The Bitch continued to sneer. "No other excuses?"

"What do I have to do," Emma eventually sighed, collapsing back to her chair.

The rage, the indignity, and the humiliation still shone in her chest, but Emma Frost would put up with it for now. Once she had His Love, the Bitch would be put in her place. For now, she'd keep her tongue.

"Do?" The White Queen's sneer disappeared behind an icy glare. "There's nothing you can do. I kept it a secret the first few times because I really do understand wanting to feel him. I do. But I warned you to stop. I warned you that the momentary satisfaction is not worth the cost. And you kept going. It's too late. I already told Mikael."

“You what!?”

“You didn’t even consider the fact that others in the Family all work on clearing out the plague did you? If it weren’t for the fact I asked to settle this personally, he would have known from the first time you took one of your little trips.”

“You didn’t have to tell him then!?”

“Of course I told him. Did you think I’d betray the man I loved for you? That you were worth hurting him?” The Bitch asked incredulously.

“I’d never hurt Him!”

“You would,” The Bitch denied. “Because you don’t understand him. You don’t even try. All Emma Frost can think about is herself.”

Emma took a deep breath, stopping herself from reacting to the insult and focusing on the problem at hand.

“This should not be such a problem,” Emma rationalized, trying to do some damage control. “It looks bad, but it will blow over pretty quickly, right? It’s just a plague released by some no-name villain that He can cure with a touch of His hand. I’ll stop taking the Blood, destroy my stash, and keep my head down for a few months while focusing on Priscilla’s career. We’ll restart the plan from the ground up once this plague is dealt with.”

“Even now,” The Bitch sighed. “You still don’t get it. I told you this was important to him. I told you to stop. Even if he can cure it now, it doesn’t mean he always could. You have no idea how much he has suffered because of the Old Blood. And you don’t want to know. You don’t care about him or anyone else, only yourself. Because everything is about Emma Frost. You’d truly become a shackle around his neck.”

All the hate, disgust, and rage had left The Bitch.

All that remained in her voice, in the eyes that looked at Emma, was despondence and despair.

That, more than anything else, terrified Emma.

“I’ll prove you wrong,” she said. “I’ll prove I can be useful. I’ll prove I Love Him.”

“You don’t love me.”

Emma’s heart seized in simultaneous surges of jubilation and fear as He appeared a shower of starlight.

“Mikael? Why’re you here?” The Bitch asked, looking just as surprised as Emma felt.

“I have a job for you,” He said, pointing towards the sky.

Ah, he was probably talking about the alien ships covering the sky for the last few hours. The news stations were going nuts, and people were panicking, but Emma wasn’t that concerned.

It wasn’t like alien invasions were that rare. There had been two last year alone. Not

only would she ride it out in her bunker while the Justice League, PRT, or some other heroes dealt with it, but Emma could defend herself fine if push came to shove.

If anything, the attack would lead to a good quarter for Frost Pharmaceuticals, even on top of their bump from fear of the Blood plague.

Of course, that was Emma's usual response, but she smelled an opportunity here.

"I'll help," she said, standing from her desk once more to step closer to Him.

"No," He denied instantly. "You won't."

Her heart seized once more at the tone of His voice.

"Mikael?" The Bitch asked once more, her voice hesitant.

He looked at her, and Emma knew they were talking psychically.

Jealousy surged within her at the sight, but she kept it down.

It was just another aspect she'd one day gain as well.

"Alright," The Bitch eventually sighed and, with one last look at Emma, walked out of the office.

Leaving Emma alone with Him.

Uncharacteristic shyness and hesitancy filled Emma at that moment. Normally, she'd at least put on a show to get Him riled up, but the last time He had been here, that hadn't ended well for her.

… Well, it had. Emma had gotten off to that memory dozens of times.

But the tension in the room, the look in His draconic eyes, stopped her.

Eventually, He broke the silence.

"Tell me, do you think someone who is mind-controlled should be held responsible for their actions while under that control?"

What did that have to do with anything? Still, the answer was easy for Emma.

"No," she denied. "The mind behind the action is responsible, not the person controlled."

"What about if it is not absolute control, just influence? What if all that happened was a nudge in a certain direction? Who's at fault then?"

"That's," Emma paused, giving the questions some thought. "It would depend on the strength and skill of the influence. However, both parties bear responsibility because the influencer didn't force the action. Whether it happens by psychic, monetary, or other forms of influence, they are all the same in that case. What is this all about?"

"I'm still trying to decide what to do with you," He admitted with a shrug, stepping closer to Emma.

Once more, He placed a finger on her forehead. But this time, He didn't press forward, just leaving it touching her skin gently.

Emma looked up into His draconic eyes.

She swallowed a lump in her throat.

“Do with me?”

Her voice was equal parts nervous and excited. His touch inflamed her, but she knew she was on thin ice.

“I should kill you.”

It was so blase. So casual.

“I’ve killed everyone else I found messing with the Old Blood. I should kill you as well.”

He’d do it, she realized. He would kill her.

Emma was shaking. In fear. In desire.

She wanted to live. She wanted to live with Him forever. To have His Love.

But if she couldn’t have His Love, she’d die anyway. If not soon, then in a century or a millennia.

So wouldn’t it be better to die by His hand?

To forever have her blood dye His finger red so some part of her would remain with Him.

Never before had she wanted something more.

Never before had she wanted to both live and die.

Ah, to live like this for eternity. Wouldn’t that be perfect?

For the first time, Emma Frost actually regretted her repeated injections and curing of the Old Blood instead of just the consequences of getting caught.

In a red geyser erupting from every pore of her body, Blood fountained out.

For one last time, Emma Frost was cured of the Blood plague.

Usually, this occurred in the air over the ocean atop a platform of shadows. The Blood would pass through people, clothes, and everything else as it fell to the water below, where His power would clean the ocean of its taint.

This time?

He didn’t bother.

Blood covered her clothes, her hair, and every inch of her office.

Keeping a finger pressed gently against Emma’s forehead, He waived his hand.

The entire room, Emma included, was bathed in flames, destroying every drop of Blood and her office.

If Emma Frost had died at that moment in His fire, she might have been happy.

But she did not.

There was no pain.

He waved His hand again, and the fire extinguished.

He hadn't tried to kill her. He was making a point.

Emma was left naked as the day she was born in the charred remains of her office. He looked at her nude form and felt nothing.

She was identical to His wife, yet he did not Love her.

She was not His.

Perhaps death would have been kinder.

"I get it. I really do. I know how hard it is to fight fake feelings of love. So I am not going to kill you," He sighed. "The next time you knowingly get infected, I will Hunt you like the Beast you become."

"What about-"

"Your little plan to seduce me ends here," He cut her off. "It will never happen. I am not blind to all the help you've given, though. We will still work together, you will still make most of the money from Priscilla's career, and you can continue to use our 'relationship' for your reputation. But it will only be for business."

A small part of Emma's mind recognized this deal for what it was—a way to 'reward' her for her work while also ensuring it was in her best interest to continue supporting Priscilla.

From an objective standpoint, the proposition only had benefits for Emma.

That part of her brain was ignored in favour of the terror that filled Emma's heart.

She was being abandoned. Cast aside.

What did benefits matter when the one thing she really wanted had no hope of ever coming true?

"Please, don't do this," Emma begged, uncaring for her nudity.

This was supposed to be a punishment, a warning that He could and would kill her.

But what did she care for death?

"There might have been a chance once, a one-in-a-million type of thing," He shook his head with a wry smile. "But I won't lead you on when there isn't any chance. And, believe it or not, I do have a soft spot for 'Emma Frosts.' For all my wives, really. So, let's make this a clean-cut and move on with our lives. While I might be stronger than most, I have full confidence you can find someone else."

"I won't," Emma denied vehemently. "There's only you. I love you!"

"You really don't," He denied with a sigh. "I am not one to talk about artificial starts to relationships. That's not the problem. What you love is not me. It's the idea of me. Emma's idea of me."

"…What?"

“Heartbreak wasn’t me,” He said with a shrug. “It was Emma. Her idealization of me made manifest. Everyone felt Heartbreak, but you went from using our ‘relationship’ as a tool for benefit to being wholly consumed by me—by the idea of me. You have not once actually connected to me. This has been our longest time alone together. Face the truth. You don’t love me.”

Emma didn’t have Old Blood in her, but she had infected herself almost a dozen times over the last month.

Her Insight was high.

And the Truth didn’t care for feelings.

Everyone had reacted to Heartbreak, but only she had been wholly consumed by it after it was gone. She had seen the memories of hundreds of peoples’ experiences, but only hers had been so all-consuming.

Those thirty seconds had affected the whole world, but only Emma Frost had her entire world rewritten after it ended.

For thirty seconds, Mikael had been everything to the whole world.

For Emma Frost, Mikael was everything ever.

It was only her high Insight that saved Emma from Frenzy.

Mikael watched her with eyes filled, not with the Love she wanted and needed, but with pity.

That was the last straw.

“…out. GET OUT!”

Mikael didn’t even flinch at her shout or when she tried to push him away. He simply kept her in place with the finger against her forehead as she glared at him.

Eventually, he sighed and dropped his hand.

Emma continued to glare as he left her office, closing the door behind him.

Only when she was alone in her destroyed office did she allow herself to collapse in despair.

******

I let out a sigh as I looked at my wife.

“Anything?”

“No,” Emma said, her voice subdued. “Her mind did not shift before and after Freeing her, after she wanted to be Free of the Blood, after you told her of my Semblance, or after you left.”

So she had been doing everything of her own free will?

I sighed again.

Knowing that Darkseid, possibly with parts of the Anti-Life Equation, was behind everything had me second-guessing myself so much. What were people acting on their own and what was them being controlled by a literal embodiment of tyranny?

The only people I could trust were those who had the Defences or that I was actively Freeing. That, plus allowing Emma to bypass her mental defences, was why I had kept touching Frost the entire time.

Even Valeria wasn't as trusted as before because I never knew when Darkseid would gain the complete Equation. Once he did, he wouldn't need the emotional aspect of his current form of control to subjugate people.

That was one of the reasons I was cutting things off with Frost right now.

The other was her actions.

Anyone who fucked with the Old Blood was not someone I wanted to invite into my Family.

"Is she doing anything now?"

"Crying," Emma said simply. There was no pity in her voice.

I, on the other hand, felt a bit of it.

Not that I had left a naked woman in the burnt remains of her office. That was mainly to remove any listening devices before I told her of Heartbreak.

No, I felt pity because I could understand being confronted with fake feelings of absolute love. Only I had tried to fight those feelings, even if they turned out to be real, while Frost was ready to embrace the feeling and make it real.

Still, pity did not change that she had crossed my bottom line.

"…I don't blame you."

"It was my Semblance," Emma shook her head. "I should have cut things off after I realized how affected she was by it."

"Maybe," I shrugged.

"Even before that, I should have just killed her and replaced her," Emma said, looking away. "So much less trouble."

"I won't lie and say I didn't have a slight hope things would work out somehow," I admitted with a smile, trying to cheer her up. "'Twins, Basil. Twins!' The idea is increadibly appealing on a base level. A few years of getting to know each other, and who knows?" I waggled my eyebrows suggestively, but Emma didn't react. "Sorry. I know how much this means to you."

Emma remained silent, and I sighed again.

I think Emma had been trying to prove something to herself more than trying to prove

something to me.

It was probably something like, ‘Even if I started loving you because you accidentally Mastered me, we would have fallen in love anyway.’

I would always feel awkward about the start of our relationship. I had accidentally killed the Emma Frost I summoned and replaced her with one utterly devoted to me—the exact thing I had tried to avoid with Catalogue.

I wouldn’t be Me if I ever stopped feeling awkward about that.

But that was just the start of our relationship. I hadn’t lied to Frost when I told her I wasn’t one to speak about unnatural starts to relationships.

My wives’ love for me had been sped up artificially by being exposed to the lures and Dragon Aura for thousands of years while I was trapped and before I gained my Freedom.

My own love for most of them, while having a basis in our interactions while I was imprisoned, was primarily based on my time watching them while I Dreamed for millions of years.

Ours was a Mad Love, but that didn’t make everything that came about after it any less real or meaningful.

But Frosts didn’t love me.

She loved Emma’s perfected vision of me.

She had never touched my mind; she was not someone I had Mastered, taken responsibility for, and fallen in love with. She was just a woman who happened to look like a woman I loved, who was close enough in mind to get some bleed-over, and who decided to force the attention she wanted.

Maybe if our relationship had time to develop, it could have become something real, even if the start was artificially induced.

But her actions prevented that.

I did bear some of the blame, not being able to give her the attention she thought she deserved for all she did, but the sad reality of my relationships was that was true for every one of my wives. I never felt like I had enough time to spend with all of them, and I know that sometimes a few of them felt lonely.

The only reason our relationship worked was because we were a Family. We could turn to each other when others were busy.

Emma didn’t want the Family. She wanted me.

She couldn’t realize we were a package deal.

Even Ranni and Melina, the two who had the slightest connection to the others, still spent most of their time these days with Raven and Medea, respectively, as they worked together.

“I’ll start scanning the aliens,” Emma eventually said.

“How many seals?”

“Just one should do. For the range. I’ll fly with Medea to get close invisibly, but I want to be able to reach you in a moment if needed.”

“Take my power,” I ‘Commanded,’ and Emma nodded before returning to the Island.

Alone, I sighed again, feeling so very tired.

But there was no rest for the weary.

Once we had some free time, I’d spend a day lavishing Emma with attention.

For now, I needed to think of a plan to turn whatever sort of trap this was to my own benefit.

For that, I needed to know why millions of spaceships were surrounding the planet and not doing anything.

That wasn’t an exaggeration. Literally, millions of ships were clogging the sky. They weren’t visible in the parts of the world where it was daytime since they were maintaining distance from beyond the moon, but anyone who looked up could notice something odd when they couldn’t see the stars. Even an amateur astronomer could find them.

More arrived every minute like the whole universe decided Earth was the place to park their army, but nobody did anything over.

It was just so weird.

It was definitely something hostile. They were all warships of some sort. Enough lasers were pointed at my head to make any sci-fi nerd hard.

But there had been no threats, no invasions, nothing. They were just floating there.

Ominously.

It was a blockade of some sort, clearly. But why? What was the goal? What was the end game?

I genuinely had no idea if I was the target or not or if I was what they were hoping to accomplish.

Were they all mindless slaves to the Lord of Apocalypse?

Was this an invasion? An intervention after the disappearance of Gladiator?

I really wished I had a phone number I could dial and be like, ‘Hey, you can’t park in my SPACE. That’s mine! That’s where I keep all my stuff.’

Unfortunately, I didn’t have anything like that, but I had something better.

A creepy little girl.

I was just about to teleport to Valeria’s secret compound when a mini Raven dressed in a purple cloak appeared from my shadow, glommed onto the side of my head, and started rubbing my hair affectionately.

“Yes, Love?”

“Diana says you should come to see her,” the emoticlones said, peppering my cheeks with tiny kisses. “She’s with the League, and they know what’s happening.”

Forget a creepy little girl, I had a Batman.

“Sure,” I agreed, rubbing Love’s head with a fingertip like I used to do with Tini-Ranni. “Where are they at?”

“I’ll take you.”

“Thanks,” I nodded. Before disappearing into the shadows, I needed to point out something. “We don’t have time for a quicky this time, I’m afraid, so just the teleport, please.”

Love pouted, which was very cute, but reluctantly nodded.

I reappeared in a place any DC fan would recognize instantly.

The Watchtower.

The vista of Earth below and the fleets of ships above didn’t leave any doubt that we were in a space station just outside Earth’s atmosphere.

Thanks to Emma’s snooping, I had known that Batman was building a space station now that the Simurgh was dealt with, but I hadn’t expected it to be ready so soon.

The view was honestly incredible, but I still preferred flying with my own wings.

Still, I wasn’t here for the view.

The part of the Watchtower I had appeared in was a meeting room of sorts, with a long oval table, a dozen or so chairs surrounding it, and a 3D projection of the Earth and the millions of ships surrounding it.

The Justice League was running on fumes, with so many missing, so I was unsurprised to see the meeting room practically deserted.

Batman was there, of course, as was my wife. So were Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, the strongest League members still active.

The look on Diana’s face did not inspire confidence.

“I’ve been told we know what our little green friends want?” I said to break the ice of my sudden arrival. “Besides probes, of course.”

Nobody laughed or even cracked a smile.

Tough space station.

“They have not contacted us,” Batman explained, diving right in. “All electromagnetic or magical signals are blocked from coming in or going out. We are completely isolated. In a few hours, I will be able to bypass this block, but we might not have that long to wait.”

“Why not?” I asked, grabbing a seat opposite the Dark Knight and beside my wife. “What do they want? Why are they here?”

“You,” Captain Marvel said with a glare.

“I’m afraid I am innocent this time, toots.” I don’t know why the space cop looked that pissed at the nickname, but I really didn’t care.

My wives might get a free pass because they had been half-joking about the accusations, but I really didn’t like being accused of things I didn’t do.

“I came because I expected you to have some info we can work with,” I said plainly, looking at Batman and ignoring the murderous heroine trying to spontaneously develop laser eyes. “If you just called me here to throw baseless accusations, I will go and try and make actual progress.”

“They… might not be baseless,” Diana said gently with a wry smile.

“Why not?” I asked with a frown.

“Because the only thing that would warrant this level of intergalactic cooperation between rivals that hate each other is a threat to the whole universe,” Batman said plainly. “Combined with the blockade and the lack of any transmission, in all likelihood, they are here for the Sleeper.”

“The Sleeper,” I asked.

I recognized the name, as I was occasionally called as such by a few of the spaceships that found me. If I remember correctly, it was also the name of an S-class threat in the original Worm.

But again, I hadn’t done anything while Dreaming. I was trying to avoid everyone.

“The largest and most dangerous cognito hazard in the known universe.”

My brow rose at Wonder Woman’s words, and it stayed up there as the heroes explained the situation.

A bogeyman of the universe who, by doing nothing but sleeping, would inevitably grow large enough to occupy all space.

Whose very presence drove people mad, and that madness spread to entire planets as anyone infected descended into a wild Frenzy.

Whose rule of engagement was something like ‘do not wake the evil while it sleeps.’

Or, in English terms, ‘Don’t poke the sleeping dragon.’

Only I wasn’t sleeping.

I, for the first time in the universe’s history, was awake.

And I had moved to Earth, a tiny planet with a history of being filled with absolute powerhouses and madmen. A planet that had, in the last few decades, been involved with more intergalactic incidents than most solar systems experienced in their entire lifespans.

Hearing about ‘The Sleeper’ from an outside perspective, I also would be shitting bricks if I thought a mind plague like that would gain hosts from the heroes and villains of

Earth.

"Huh."

That was all I could say after hearing all that.

I guess it was my fault, after all.

Yoruichi would never let me live this down.

A mix of emotions filled me, but I didn't let them show on my face.

"'Huh?'" Captain Marvel snorted. "That's all you can say for yourself? 'Huh.' Billions are dead because of you! Maybe trillions!"

"Because idiots didn't take my warnings seriously," I scowled. "I never forced anyone to do anything. They chose to keep coming back. I had no idea they'd go insane or that it would spread."

Sure, Great One spread madness and Insight and Frenzy could be infectious if not handled. Once the Truth comes out, it is hard to put it back in the box.

But I had not forced anyone to stay near me.

I had even saved lives, sending a few lost ships home that got lost in the darkness between stars. If anything, that was the time I was most heroic, seeing as I didn't want to kill anyone. (Or couldn't, in a few cases. Space was scary. Comic Space was Comic Scary.)

I had done nothing.

But even doing nothing has consequences that I needed to deal with.

Such was Life.

"I assume you have some sort of plan," I asked, looking at Batman.

"You need to leave Earth."

"I don't think seeing me flying at them will stop them from using all that Dakka," I shrugged helplessly.

"Teleport back to where you were sleeping," Batman continued without reacting to my joke. Did they have Warhammer here? "Or teleport far enough away that you can fly there. Once I can communicate with them, we will have a few people on Earth with good standing in the universe. They will convince them that you never actually left. A villain from Earth teleported you here to use your abilities to destroy the world. We stopped it. You went back."

That sounded like a comic book storyline that could happen all right.

"And how will you explain everything that's happened in the last few months?" I asked curiously.

"It was all part of the Dream," Wonder Woman said. "A collective madness that was part of the villain's scheme."

"Freed from this terrible Dream, huh," I murmured to myself.

“You’ll do it?” Wonder Woman asked. “If so, please release my mother and sisters.”

“It’s a good plan,” I nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

None of the heroes looked pleased at my words.

“We don’t have much time,” Batman said after a pause. “More than likely, they are setting up something that will either isolate or destroy the Earth permanently and hope it takes you with it.”

“It shouldn’t be long before I have an answer,” I said agreeably. “I am gathering information on my end as well, and I need to talk to my wives before making such a decision.”

“They can remain if they wish,” Wonder Woman offered. “Realistically, only you need to leave Earth.”

“…Right,” I said, looking at the heroine for a long moment. “Like I said, I’d think about it. Diana, let’s go.”

My wife just nodded and stood with me.

“Ladies. Bat. Always a pleasure.”

I teleported back to my Island with my wife, feeling slightly lonelier and more tired than before.

But I couldn’t rest just yet.

There was no way I was going along with a plan to keep me off-world long enough to convince these aliens I was gone for good.

Still, Batman was right. I had little time.

For some reason, Darkseid was forcing a confrontation. Not between me and him but between me and either the people of Earth or the aliens.

I didn’t know the goal, but I knew I couldn’t afford to fall into another trap like with the Skyfathers.

We got lucky last time. This time, I wouldn’t count on luck.

Of course, that was when the sky opened in a cacophonous chorus of ‘BOOMS!’

Author's Note:

Not gonna lie; I've had the week from hell, and this chapter suffered for it. On top

HEARTBREAK

"Grief is the price we pay for love."
-Queen Elizabeth II

Was Emma Frost forever cursed to hurt Mikael?

Time and time again, she hurt him.

Emma Frost hurt him when she violated a poor prisoner's mind to gain answers he didn't have.

Mikael didn't care about privacy. He had seen the state Emma Frost was in and healed her after the first attempt by purging the memory from her mind, Only for Emma Frost to do the same thing again, obsessed that he was 'hiding things from her.'

Yet again, Mikael healed her with a Seal, only this time without removing the memories so that the same mistake would not repeat itself. Unaware at the time that a whole new 'Emma Frost' was born in the mind of a Great One.

But in healing her, she hurt him when she exposed his 'fake' feelings, filling him with existential dread for centuries as he fought against love he thought was forced upon him.

Still, Mikael worked with Emma. Confidants. He had let her into his mind. She was the only woman out of ten whom he had fully trusted to act for the betterment of not only himself but also those of the other women.

And Emma had betrayed that trust. Unwilling to be cast aside when he was free, to spend the rest of eternity without him, she had manipulated everyone. It wasn't a stretch to say that Emma had been the single most significant contributor to building the Family and bringing them together in that year of imprisonment on the Island.

All for her benefit.

All so they could present a united front.

All so she would not lose him.

Learning of her betrayal had hurt him more than anything else. He closed off his mind.

He closed off his heart.

For the years after Mikael discovered her plan to oppose the thing he thought they were working toward, freedom, he had been alone.

Nobody to trust.

Nobody to confide in.

For those years between that fateful conversation in Irithyll and his final battle against

the Soul of Cinder, all that had pushed Mikael forward was the faint hope that it would finally end.

That it would all end.

That he'd be Free.

Only it didn't.

Another prison cell awaited in the Lands Between.

As much as Emma felt jealous of Melina, she would forever be grateful for the Kindling Maiden. If not for her, for her and Torrent's Company, she feared Mikael would have forever remained closed off, unable to trust or love again.

But Emma Frost was not done hurting Mikael.

Seven weeks.

Seven weeks did the man she loved live in fear of her.

For seven weeks, Mikael knew Emma Frost was the key to his freedom and hated every moment of it.

The fear, the rage, the loss, and the pain.

For seven weeks, Mikael tried to lose himself in the carnage and blood of Yharnam.

He wanted an end.

Yet he could not. Even as he became more and more beastlike, even as his body became drenched in blood, he maintained perfect clarity.

He was fully aware that every beast was once a man like him. Some might have been monsters, but most were simply humans put in a situation by forces they had no control over.

Fear and hope had driven them to this.

They took in Old Blood to cure sickness. They imbibed blood to be strong enough to defend themselves. They communed with the Great Ones because they did not wish to be pawns for beings so much more powerful than them.

Mikael saw himself in every beast he killed.

Was he even the same man he was before making the Deal?

Was Mikael himself, or someone else? Something else?

A simple man who dreamed of flying, who had never held a blade and never threatened anyone's life, had become a man whose victims' bodies would form mountains of corpses.

And what would Mikael become once Emma had access to his very core?

When the woman who had betrayed him so profoundly could rewrite everything that made Mikael 'Mikael' on a whim?

Would he still be himself?

Or just another slave, a meet puppet that wore his face while ‘Mikael’ was wholly obliterated or worse, trapped within himself, unable to affect the world.

Emma didn’t betray Mikael again. She did exactly as he hoped. She freed him.

In that moment, when Emma Frost psychically connected the Avatar to the Dragon, the past to the present, the prisoner to the embodiment of Freedom, Emma Frost had seen it all.

At that moment, when the Dream dissolved, when Mikael gained the benefit of the Defences, and when he was presented with everything he could have ever wished for, Emma saw his choice.

And her heart broke.

Because Emma Frost realized she had hurt him in a way that she could not make up for, no matter what she did.

Emma Frost’s very existence hurt Mikael.

She tried to deny it. She wanted to tell herself it was one of his schemes.

A long-term plan against Death, or The Company, or some other adversary.

She had tried to assuage herself that it was just a stopgap, that she could fix things.

The first step was to prove that Emma Frost would have come to love him, even without experiencing his Mad Love.

No matter how much she hated Frost, no matter how much she hated that selfishness, that twisted ego, that demented desire to control, manipulate, and dominate, Emma would put up with it.

She needed to prove to Mikael that they were not chains around his neck, and he was not a chain around theirs.

That his Mad Love was not a mistake.

That he could be Free.

But Emma Frost was incapable of not hurting Mikael.

Her Semblance twisted everything. The manifestation of her very soul turned her plan into ruins. Frost went from a scheming ally to a sycophantic love slave after only experiencing a fraction of an imitation of Mikael’s Mad Love.

Emma should have killed Frost then and there when she realized what she had done. She should have given up her plan or put it on hold until she found another version in another world.

But she hadn’t. Because every day further reinforced her fears.

She could see it in his mind.

Mikael was living it all again.

The power manipulating him from the shadow.

The repeated failures of plans to gain more information.

The feeling of a noose tightening around his neck.

The paranoia. What was real? Who was making their decisions freely? Who was an enemy?

The loneliness. People he had reached out to, in his hesitant way, disappeared one by one.

The Old Blood giving monsters power and desperate people hope, only to turn them into beasts.

The genuine possibility was that his very existence was a danger to the world. That never would he be able to form bonds outside the Family, outside those who he bound and bound him.

To Mikael, this world might as well be another cell.

Emma needed to break this cycle.

So she continued playing her little game with Frost, trying to push back a truth she didn't want to confront.

And what did she accomplish?

Emma hurt Mikeal again.

Instead of proving that she would have come to love him without his influence, all she proved was that his influence was even more dangerous than he feared.

Instead of Freeing the man she loved, Emma Frost added another chain to his neck.

'Is this close enough?'

'…It's fine,' Emma answered Medea as they stopped well beyond Earth's atmosphere, yet still far enough from the armada of ships circling the planet.

Neither the Dragon of Magic nor the Dragon of Diamond needed to breathe in the void of space, nor did they have trouble seeing the absolute wall of vessels that surrounded the planet. There was enough space between them not to hamper movement in case they needed to take action, but there were so many of them, and so many ranks deep that they blocked out the distant stars.

Emma recognized a few of them from her home world, and the entire ensemble looked like one of those Dyson Spheres that a few advanced civilizations used to harness stellar energy.

Instead of being an energy farm, every army in the known galaxy surrounded Earth with their guns pointed at them. There was enough firepower here to destroy the entire Solar System a few times over.

Their goal?

Well, Emma was here to find out.

Even if she continued to hurt Mikael, she'd be damned if she wasn't at least useful.

Powered by one of his Command Seals, Emma scanned tens of thousands of minds simultaneously. She wasn't lacking for targets, as every ship held hundreds, if not thousands, of personnel.

She quickly realized that most were not ground troops. This was not an invasion. In fact, most of the grunts had no idea what was going on and were following orders.

Following a trail of minds, Emma reached the minds of ship captains. As a rule of thumb, their mental defences were slightly better on average, and without actively touching Mikael, she could not act like their defences were not even there.

Still, she was Emma Frost. She had no problem navigating a few mental walls, even if she had to shrink her focus from tens of thousands to a few thousand.

Again, she didn't get much. They were more in the know than the grunts, but not by much. Most were unhappy being here, side by side with historic enemies and rivals.

Earth had a reputation in the wider universe, and most would prefer to stay clear of it and its crazy inhabitants.

In addition to their dissatisfaction with their location and allies, many captains were on edge due to strict communication rules.

All messages were to be blocked, whether from ally or enemy, except from a ship directly above them in the chain of command. Everything was to be locked down, no matter who it was or what they were saying.

Anyone who violated this command would be destroyed instantly, and no survivors were allowed. They were ordered to stay in place with everyone else and blockade the planet.

Anything that tried to travel beyond the moon was to be shot down by the entire fleet, whether a machine or a person.

Thankfully, Emma and Medea were invisible and undetectable due to the latter's magic.

Still, it meant Emma would have to travel up the chain of command until she found a ship with a more knowledgeable leader.

Thankfully, she wasn't alone out here.

'It's an absolute shame that people don't go around laying out their every plan as soon as I start listening in,' Robin said dryly as Emma connected to a clone spying on a nearby ship.

'If they did, I'd fear for any information gained,' Medea commented with a mental chuckle. 'It would be clear that they knew you were spying and were feeding you information.'

‘A girl can dream.’

‘Can you point me toward a commander or admiral,’ Emma asked the former pirate.

‘Here,’ Robin said, projecting a few images through their mental connection. ‘Those look the most important, though I am only basing this on my knowledge of human fleets. Franky would have a field day here. By the way, do you know anyone who has studied species, culture and their influence on ship design? The variety here is quite astounding, and I would love to study which aspects are practicality based on species and which are cultural influences.’

‘Nobody off the top of my head,’ Emma replied absentmindedly, mind already shifting through a few captains of the vessels Robin pointed to. ‘I do know of a few planets that are more in tune with intergalactic networks. I’d start looking there once this is all sorted out.’

‘It would be interesting to study alien magic systems,’ Medea agreed. ‘So much of mine is based on the Age of the Gods or the Human Order that came after. A wholly unique perspective and system could give me the last spark I need to recreate the First Flame.’

Emma didn’t answer, finally finding a mind containing the needed information.

A Thanagarian admiral who had been part of a critical meeting.

“The key to the plan is to kill Darkseid before he can unleash The Sleeper,” Gladiator told the gathered commanders of the emergency coalition. “Should he completely rouse it from its slumber, the entire universe will be swallowed in an endless dream, driving us all to madness.”

Kathal Bel’s wings itched at the sight of the leader of the Shi’ar within striking distance, yet he held himself back.

This crisis could affect the entire universe, and Thanagar counted on him and his ships to keep them all safe.

It didn’t mean he was pleased by the orders from on high to play nice with so many enemies.

“Your orders are not to engage but to maintain the blockade,” Gladiator continued. “Do not let anyone or anything escape. Should Darkseid manage to leave, he will hide once more and continue his project to wake the dragon. Once we have defeated Darkseid, The Sleeper will be brought back to the quarantined zone by a team of Green Lanterns, each of whom are willing to give up their rings after this mission.”

There was a moment of sombre silence at the words.

For Green Lanterns to give up their rings, some of the most potent weapons in the known universe, just on the off chance that they might be infected underscored the threat of the Sleeper.

But some questions needed to be asked

“If this ‘Darkseid’ is such a big deal,” another commander asked with a snort. A human

from a trade coalition, if Kathal recognized the symbol on his chest right. "We should destroy the planet and drag the beast from the rubble."

"Not only would that kill billions of sapient lives," the Green Lantern of Earth's sector said with crossed arms. "It would also fail. Darkseid will not stay dead. He will return, reborn on another planet. It could be yours or anyone else's. We are lucky we know where he is now and cannot miss this chance to contain him."

"An elite force," Gladiator continued. "Composed of myself and the others gathered before you, will be the ones to battle Darkseid."

While it was a relief that not only would Gladiator, a Green Lantern, the last son of Krypton, and other earthlings be the ones engaging in battle directly, it did leave one glaring question.

"What is our role," Kathal said, his wings flaring in agitation. "You cannot mean to have us simply sit and watch?"

"That is exactly your role," Gladiator glared back. "You will ensure that Darkseid does not escape."

Kathal would forever deny the relief he felt at the words. He had no desire to tangle with Earthlings. Those people were barbaric maniacs who seemed to always be on the cusp of one intergalactic crisis after another.

Case in point.

"We can fight him so long as he is confined to the Earth's atmosphere," one of the humans standing with the Shi'ar leader explained. "A home-field advantage that will prevent him from using his full power. But that is not your key role."

"The blockade is an important job," Superman said with a smile that was at once kind as it was grim. "If someone tries to escape Earth, you will slow them down enough for us to catch up. But in an ideal world, you will not see any action. Your most important job is if we fail."

The Kryptonian looked over the room grimly, eyes sad.

"I do not say this lightly. You are the best of the best from all over the universe. Skill, speed, and coordination between your teams. You have the best chance to escape. Your job will be to warn your people of our failure."

"Darkseid, or as he's known in his disguise, Mikael, is a being solely focused on domination and enslavement of all life in the universe," the human in powered armour of red and gold joined in, face plate receding to demonstrate his dour face. "He managed to rouse the Sleeper once. For thirty seconds, my entire home planet was consumed by that Dream."

"We call it Heartbreak," the Green Lantern said seriously. "Nobody could resist. Nobody ***wanted*** *to resist. For those thirty seconds, we would have died for that Dream. All of Earth would have fallen without putting up a fight, us included, if Darkseid's control hadn't*

failed at the last moment. We cannot expect to get that lucky again."

"So we will not fail," Gladiator said imperiously. "Darkseid will fall, the Sleeper will return to its quarantine, and we will all return to our regular lives."

The rest of the meeting was taken up by details about 'Darkseid,' his twelve 'slaves,' and their capabilities.

That… didn't make any sense.

Certainly, it was obvious that the missing heroes were being controlled, but what was the plan?

Why, if this was a plot by Darkseid, had he revealed himself after working so hard to remain unknown? As far as the Family could tell, nobody in this universe had ever heard of Darkseid or Apokolips. That secrecy had been his most significant advantage.

And he had just announced himself to everyone.

More than that, the method was odd.

Mikael was Darkseid?

Why?

Emma could understand the reputation of 'The Sleeper' thanks to Kathal's mind, but why separate Mikael from his Dragon form?

If Darkseid wanted the universe to take up arms against them, why not just say Mikael was the Sleeper? It would have the same effect.

And where was this 'elite strike force' of the missing heroes supposed to trap Mikael?

It wouldn't work, of course. The only things that bound Mikael were those that he allowed to do so.

But it had been hours since the blockade had started, and nobody had seen any of the missing heroes. So where were they?

More and more, something about this situation was ringing alarm bells in Emma's mind.

They had always known this invasion to be some enemy plot or trap. Still, it was becoming increasingly apparent that they were much less informed than they thought after discovering Darkseid's identity.

'What did you discover?'

Emma replayed the memory to Medea and Robin as she continued to scan the minds of the innumerable ships surrounding the planet. She spent less than a second on each, just verifying that they didn't know anything more before moving on.

'He's fishing,' Robin said as she finished Kathal Bel's memory. 'He's looking for someone or something, and Mikael's the bait.'

'Someone else is looking for Darkseid,' Medea concurred. 'He doesn't know where

they are, though, so he's spreading 'his' location far and wide so they come to him. And they will see Mikael, think he is Darkseid, and fight.'

'It's the situation with the gods all over again,' Robin said grimly. 'We're being used as weapons. I'll let the others-' Robin's mental voice froze. 'Numerous portals have opened in the sky above the Island. I think they're Boom tubes.'

'Darkseid. Is he in the Jewel?' Medea asked hurriedly. Magic was already wrapped around her and Emma, preparing to teleport them as soon as she knew where to go.

'No, above it. And it's not Darkseid.' Robin said, but there was no relief in her voice. 'I don't remember all of them, but that is definitely Orion. He looks just like the comics. They're attacking the Jewel. I think we found the fish.'

No matter who they were, they had no hope of actually breaking through the Jewel that surrounded the Island for the simple reason that it wasn't actually there. It was just a projection Mikael used to maintain an anchor in this reality.

If Mikael didn't allow anything through, nothing would get through, whether it was Darkseid or his estranged son.

Still, it didn't mean those off the Island were safe.

'Call everyone back home,' Medea ordered Robin. 'Tell them to return to the Island. We got the information we came for. We don't have to defend other places or people if we're the target. We can hold up while we decide what to do next.'

'Got it.'

'Something's changing,' Emma said before Medea could teleport them away. She had never stopped scanning the people's minds on the ships, hoping to gain more information.

A transmission was coming through to every ship, and Emma watched it through a thousand eyes. It was all the same.

"We failed," Superman said simply. Half his body was missing, and he stared at the camera with bleary eyes. "Carry this message to every planet and every people. Darkseid won. He will enslave everyone. Run."

The message cut off.

Ships turned to flee.

Space lit up in hundreds of different ways as hundreds of thousands of vessels fled, carrying news of impending doom to every corner of the universe.

'That was all in English,' Robin said hurriedly, also having seen the transmission from all her spying eyes. 'Many didn't have automatic translators on their ships. They shouldn't have understood it.'

'The image was pretty self-descriptive,' Emma said dryly, turning her attention from the leaving ships to scan the world below.

She found the minds of those attacking the Jewel quickly enough, but they were all increadibly well-defended. She couldn't even get the surface thoughts of the half dozen men and women.

At least not without revealing herself.

'No,' Robin denied. 'I was watching thousands of pilots at once. They all reacted as one. No delay, no questioning, no verification with a chain of command. They moved as one.'

'Darkseid has the Anti-Life Equation,' Medea said grimly. 'It must be hidden in that message somewhere.'

'And now it will be all over the universe,' Robin agreed. 'I can destroy about half of the ships, since I still have limbs in them, but not all of them.'

'Keep eyes on them,' Medea answered quickly. 'But don't destroy them yet. If we can deal with Darkseid, it should remove his control. He revealed his identity to lure Orion out. I'm sure he will make a move. If that doesn't happen, destroy the ones you can.'

Medea's voice didn't waver for an instant as she condemned hundreds of thousands of soldiers to death.

'…I've never found a limit in range, I guess I'll find out now.'

Despite facilitating the communication between the two women, Emma didn't pay them any attention.

All she could focus on was the horror she felt.

Because she had felt nothing else.

If the other two were right, then every single being who had seen that message was infected by the Anti-Life Equation.

Yet Emma had not noticed a single change in their minds. They didn't blank and become mindless slaves. They didn't suddenly believe Darkseid to be their god. They didn't even follow, consciously or unconsciously, any sort of unified command.

From the beginning, Emma had been the one Mikael trusted to inspect minds for controls.

And she failed once again.

Anybody could be under Darkseid's control, and she'd have no way of knowing.

'I'm going to break into one of their minds,' Emma told the other two. 'I might be able to find out what is going on. Let Mikael know what we discovered.'

'I am,' Robin said instantly.

Without further delay, Emma activated her Element.

Diamond was the simplest Element of the Family. Unlike everyone else's, which came with some pretty esoteric powers, all Diamond did was reinforce what Emma already had.

The most useless aspect was the impenetrability of her mind. Her psychic walls were literally unbreakable when she used her Element. But that was a pointless ability, thanks to the Defences doing that and more.

The most helpful ability was the reinforcement of her Diamond form. While she couldn't regenerate like Tsunade, Mikael, or Artoria with Avalon, damaging her was more difficult than breaking the scales on Mikael's true body.

Somewhere in between in usefulness was the increase in her psychic attack capabilities.

As a rule of thumb, Emma preferred not to use them. They revealed her presence to anyone with the most basic of mental defences, like an ice pick driving into their minds, and a psychic's greatest tool was their anonymity and subtlety.

That, and Mikael wasn't comfortable with Emma completely mind-blasting someone.

Still, he had forgiven her for using her Semblance, understanding the necessity. Mikael would forgive her for what she was about to do.

Because it was necessary.

Because Emma could help.

Because Emma needed to help.

So she sharpened her psychic power into a diamond tip and plunged right through Lightray's mental defences.

Not even the psychic abilities of a New God could withstand the psychic attack of Emma Frost, an Omega-level Mutant empowered by a conceptual element and backed by the power of a Command Seal.

All of the Lightray's life was laid bare before her.

At the speed of thought, Emma saw it all. His birth, his growth as a New God of New Genesis, his friendship with Orion, and their eternal war against the New Gods of Apokolips.

She saw battle after battle against the forces of Darkseid across countless realities and through every corner of the multiverse. She felt the comradery, the resolve, and the bonds between Lightray and his best friend.

She felt pride as Orion mastered the rage and hatred inherited from his tyrannic father, gaining control of a portion of the Anti-Life Equation and joy at finally overthrowing the despot with his power.

She felt Lightray's joy and pride swell further as they hunted Darkseid across the multiverse, unwilling to let the former lord of Apokolips regain his former power and prestige.

The first time they found Darkseid's reincarnation, it was a hard-fought victory.

The second time, they arrived early enough that the Dark God could not put up a fight.

They were still looking for Darkseid's third reincarnation.

The Dogs of War had hunted his lieutenants and elites dozens of times in the decades since, but the Lord of Tyrrany remained hidden.

Then, they had sensed something stirring at the edge of the multiverse, where chaos bounded order and realities bled over one another.

They had scoured hundreds of different realities for Darkseid, knowing that every day he was healing. Every second they wasted would make the inevitable battle all the more difficult.

Then, they found something.

The technology they left behind on every one of their raids across the multiverse, beacons to guide them to the slightest clue, activated.

Someone was talking about Darkseid.

From beyond the boundaries of this reality, the Dogs of War watched the coalition gather. They listened to their briefings, spied as the armies gathered, and prepared for war as ships surrounded Earth.

They were not dumb. They knew this could be a trap. The former ruler of Apokolips was as cunning as he was malicious.

It didn't matter if the plan to dominate this 'Sleeper' and use it to enslave the universe aligned with Darkseid's usual plans.

It didn't matter that Superman and other familiar heroes stood against this 'Mikael.'

What mattered was if they had found their prey or not.

And they had.

Because, even as they approached Earth, even as they watched from the Fourth World, they could not see Mikael, the Sleeper, or any of his slaves. Only through the eyes of those looking at the planet could they see the great white dragon.

Surely, only Darkseid could hide so entirely from them. This was how he had remained hidden for so long, using this weird jewel.

They'd shatter this jewelled pocket dimension, preventing Darkseid from using it to hide ever again.

They'd kill Darkseid for a fourth time, weakening him even further.

They'd free those he had enslaved.

They'd even kill this 'Sleeper' to save this portion of the multiverse.

They were soldiers in an eternal war against Tyrrany, and they were winning.

And they'd continue to win.

At the speed of thought, Emma saw it all through Lightray's eyes. Billions of years in an instant, as she only focused on what was important. Even then, details of the last few decades blurred at the speed she worked to discover anything and everything that could help Mikael.

Still, seconds were an eternity to beings like the New Gods.

Immediately, they noticed Lightray faltering in his attack on the jewelled world. From there, they sensed the turbulence of his mental state, and their psychically gifted tried to help.

They couldn't. Even as Emma tore down Lightray's mental wards and scoured his mind, she never let go of her Mind Defence. They couldn't even sense her, only the results of her actions in Lightray's mind.

In the moments following her psychic attack upon Lightray, the New Gods ceased attacking the Jewel and surrounded their comrade.

"Let him go," Big Barda ordered Mikael.

"I have no idea what is happening," Mikael said, holding up a hand as if being sworn in. "Scouts honor. Are you sure he didn't just decide that I was making sense and that stepping on a poor snek like me wouldn't get you anywhere?"

Emma knew Mikael well enough to know when his sass was genuine and when he was trying to provoke someone.

Right now, he was somewhere in between annoyed and pissed off.

He stood there alone, atop his pocket world, as he watched the New Gods try to destroy the Jewel that protected his home. They had also tried to attack him, but he had simply let everything they did pass right through him as he tried to get them to stop and talk.

Mikael himself wasn't too pleased. In addition to being attacked and accused of things he didn't do, he knew he was being manipulated and that with every second that passed, the Anti-Life Equation spread further through the universe.

The only thing keeping his hand from trying to counterattack was the fact that, so far, nobody had actually been hurt. This wasn't a situation like the one with the gods, where his Family had been threatened. The New Gods hadn't even inconvenienced him yet.

That, and doing what your enemy wants is generally a bad idea.

So, Mikael was simply a bit annoyed and trying to settle things diplomatically.

They had refused to engage in diplomacy, knowing that if they relented for even a second, Darkseid could use the opportunity to counterattack. Ironically, the more Mikael tried to get them to stop, the more they were convinced he was Darkseid.

Even standing before Mikael, they could not sense this man at all. Not his mind, not his presence in the multiverse, not even his soul.

And now Lightray had fallen.

"They think you're Darkseid," Emma told her husband through Lightray's mouth.

"I guessed as much," Mikael said sarcastically. She saw how her control over Lightray

affected him, but he wasn't willing to show it on his face in front of enemies.

"It's because they can't sense your soul," she continued speaking through Lightray. She was under mental attack from the man himself, as well as his comrades, but they could not breach Mind Defence. "It's how they've been tracking him through the multiverse."

But the Defences themselves were the problem.

Mikael's lips pursed, but he nodded in understanding.

"This should prove I am Me."

Through Lightray's senses, Emma felt what they did. It wasn't a New God ability but one derived from the Mother Boxes they carried. In addition to allowing them to open Boomtubes, it granted a limited form of omniscience in its surroundings.

A limited omniscience that was telling them this was very definitely not Darkseid.

"Wha-"

Emma didn't hear what Scott Free asked her husband.

Her Observation Haki warned her of the incoming attack.

'Scatter!'

Medea's cloak carried her upward instantly while Emma turned herself to Diamond and clad herself in Armament.

The blast of energy carved itself across the sky, illuminating the horizon in a blinding light closer to a solar flare than to any sort of explosion.

There was no sound outside the atmosphere as they were, but heat and force bloomed against Emma's defence with enough force to shatter continents and boil seas.

It wasn't enough to break Diamond.

Singed but undamaged, Emma looked upon their attacker.

A woman of silver-white flew in the void of space, looking at Emma as black Haki receded into her regular sparkling diamond skin.

She was perfect in literally every way. Every one of her limbs was the mathematically perfect ratio to be the ideal, from her legs to her hips to her chest. Even her hair, long and silver, straddled that line of ideal uniformity.

The distillation of all human females into the quintessential 'Woman' one would imagine Eve to have been, only with skin a silvery white instead of a natural colour.

Yet she was not beautiful.

Her perfect face was twisted in agony so complete that Emma's heart went out to this perfect creature despite being under attack.

"Who are you?" Emma asked aloud while reaching out for this person psychically. Emma mentally flinched at what she found. An endless well of confusion, pain, and

despair. “How did you find us?”

They were still invisible, covered by Medea’s magic and protected by Information and Tracing Defence. It should have been all but impossible to find them.

The woman, creature, whatever it was, did not answer, and Emma realized her mistake. Though she didn’t need to breathe and could speak normally and hear herself, the sound would not transmit through the void.

Her Observation Haki flared again, warning her that Emma couldn’t block the next attack this time.

A point of space distorted between her and the silver woman, smaller than a speck of dust, and tore through the distance between them in less time than it took to blink.

Emma was already moving before the attack launched, the wings of Diamond sprouting from her back and jettisoning her from the line that tore through space-time.

‘She can’t see or hear us,’ Medea assured Emma as magic circles lit under the silver woman’s feet. The force of a small bomb lit up the dark void in purple energy.

The woman didn’t even move.

‘Then how does she know where we are?’ Emma asked, her wings carrying her below and around the woman hovering immobile in the void.

‘You tell me,’ Medea grunted, weaving a spell in a heartbeat that created a bounded field around the woman that twisted space into a confusing pattern of swirls and knots.

Medea was forced to teleport away again as the space within the bounded field contracted, and the silver woman appeared behind where the witch once stood, waving a hand. The kinetic motion of the movement multiplied and folded over itself until a wall of force larger than a building blasted toward where Medea once floated, and Emma still flew.

She defended herself again, not even needing Armament and letting the force crash harmlessly into her Diamond.

Emma took the opportunity to form her psychic blast into a diamond point and blast through the wall of pain and anguish in the woman’s mind.

It was not human, that was for certain. The mind was as alien as any Emma had ever met. It was not conceptually incomprehensible, like Mikael’s, but perceiving reality through lenses and senses that Emma had no point of comparison to.

It saw, heard, smelled, felt, and tasted like a human, receiving infinitely more information than someone with superhuman senses. The rest, the perception of the world through crystalline lattices, mathematical equations, and sensory organs Emma had never even conceptualized, made everything she discovered impossible to decipher.

Except for pain.

This creature, all it did was feel pain, in all its forms. Physical, spiritual, and mental. Every sort of pain Emma could imagine, from the sharp sting of broken bones to existential fear of Mikael, leaving her to the grief and regret of realizing how much she had hurt the man she lived for.

All of it and more passed in a moment through this woman's mind.

It perceived the world, but it bore no impact on this creature because of the agony of simply existing.

But it did perceive the world.

'It's finding voids!' Emma called to Medea. 'It's not really seeing us, it's seeing where 'nothing' is. And it has more senses than I can count.'

'Can you shut it down?' The Greek witch said as she dove behind Emma's body, which blocked the rain of superheated plasma with a Diamond wing covered in Haki.

'It's not doing this,' Emma answered quickly, both of them diving out of the way of another one of those stinging tears in reality. 'Its entire mind is too busy suffering. There is no conscious thought. It's not the one controlling its body.'

'Darkseid.'

'Almost certainly.' Emma answered, her wings taking her forward to land a punch on the silver woman.

The kinetic force did nothing, even with her Diamond-covered fist, but the Haki she infused into the attack sent a ripple through the creature's body. It didn't destroy it though, only moving the creature back slightly.

'I'm not going to be much help here besides defence,' Emma said upon seeing the lack of damage. 'Robin, can you alert the others? Scathach or Artoria would be best.'

The former pirate didn't answer with words, sending images to Emma.

Yoruichi engaged in a running battle against Superman, completely uninjured despite the earlier video, reinforcing the idea that it was prerecorded.

Wonder Woman and Artoria fighting side by side against a golden man, so similar to the silver woman in front of them now in his perfect proportion and wide use of powers. They were doing much better than Emma and Medea.

Melina, clad in red and gold flames, clashing against…

Emma's heart sank as she recognized the Fantastic Four and Doctor Doom. Valeria, smiling as wide as ever, tried to drown the host of the Phoenix Force in a tide of nanobots. She missed, but the metallic creatures devoured more parts of the Baxter Building and replicated. The grey tide swelled.

Glynda had already transformed into her dragon form as she battled the Titans and Stephen Strange in his full might as Sorcerer Supreme.

Scathach was single-handedly fighting off not only the entire X-men team but also Iron Man, an army of Dragon Suits, and the rest of the Avengers.

Ranni floated within her Diarama, hundreds of thousands of dolls raining spells down on Gladiator. His confidence must be off the charts because he was moving at speeds that Emma couldn't even follow as he destroyed tens of thousands of dolls with every punch. He was moving so fast that even his weakness to magic was irrelevant because he simply wasn't being hit.

Priscilla remained on the Island with Tsunade as the former Hokage gathered Nature chakra to craft shadow clones to help with the battle against the jewel while keeping it safe. She wasn't willing to risk her unborn sons in a battle like this, but she wanted to help, nonetheless.

Raven and Pride were everywhere else.

Earth was covered in shadows as Trigon's daughter battled with tens of thousands of Supers at once. Using the Command Seals each had received to control enough Shadow to conquer a planet as they fought and subdued heroes and villains alike.

Mikael fought side by side with Orion and Mister Miracle. Every other member of the New Gods had turned on them, moving with the same malignant purpose as every other being infected with the Anti-Life Equation.

He was slower than his new comrades, but any damage he received was healed nearly instantly, and he returned every hit with a spell or slash of the Godslaying sword. He kept trying to touch his enemies, likely to Free them, but they remained out of his reach due to his slower speed.

Robin helped where she could. In addition to watching fleeing starships, she grew clones to help in every battle she could.

Hands blinded Superman for an instant before being blasted by lasers. They wrapped around the Invisible Woman, stopping her from casting a forcefield that would have trapped Melina. Enormous feet erupted from mid-air to crush tens of Dragon suits.

Robin was singlehandedly distracting every single hero on the Watchtower. Unable to actually beat most of them, Robin kept them from joining the other fights.

Emma saw all those memories in an instant.

She passed it along to everyone else, along with her own realization.

The people they were fighting, their minds were not being controlled. Or at least in a way, Emma could sense.

They weren't suffering like the silver woman in front of Emma, but they were in a similar situation. Their bodies were moving by a will, not their own.

They saw nothing wrong with their actions. Superman still felt the grief of loss as he

crashed through a building, killing its inhabitants as he chased Yoruichi. That didn't stop him from doing it again and feeling that loss again.

To him, it simply made sense. Moving in a straight line was quicker than a curve to avoid things. The good he would do catching and killing Yoruichi outweighed the bad it took to do it. The sooner he did so, the more lives he'd save.

To prove her point, Emma shut down Superman's mind.

The Kryptonian passed out mentally, completely unable to defend against the Diamond spike of psychic energy.

Just like the silver woman, he still continued to attack Yoruichi.

These people were not different from what they were before, with foreign thoughts or goals. They just acted and justified it later based on their own personalities.

And they moved as one.

The attack had been perfectly coordinated on all fronts, with no errors or mistimings. Everyone worked perfectly together, powers used at the perfect time to complement each other and not interfere.

Emma saw the whole world and realized it was all Darkseid.

These people weren't alive or dead. They weren't controlled or free.

They were simply Darkseid and moved as he willed.

Except for Orion and Scott Free, the Family was entirely alone against every enemy Darkseid could throw at them.

And they were, if not winning, then not losing.

The Family held their ground even hampered by the desire to keep most of their opponents alive.

Scathach hadn't been wrong.

They could fight the world and win.

But everyone knew the two trump cards hadn't been played yet.

Darkseid had not appeared.

Mikael had not used his actual body.

How those two cards were played would determine the victor.

But the odds could still be tilted in one direction or the other.

'That should be Eden,' Mikael called to Emma as a magical shield blocked Lightstar's rain of light. 'Artoria and Diana can keep Zion occupied. Can you two handle her?'

Emma couldn't.

She didn't say that. Couldn't say that.

Couldn't be more of a chain than she already was.

Thankfully, she was part of a large Family.

‘They should be weak to magic,’ Medea said, returning from her dragon form. ‘I can use this avatar as a conduit to its real body. If I can get some time, I can set up a sealing ritual. I will need a Seal to do it that fast.’

‘I’ll buy time,’ Emma declared.

Emma transformed, her Diamond Dragon body much larger than Medea’s Magic Dragon.

It was a good thing, too, as dozens of blasts of silver light surrounded the pair, and Emma cocooned the much smaller woman with her body.

This attack stung her a bit, despite her being clad in Armament and Emma feeling her Aura dip slightly, but not to any concerning degree yet.

‘Take two,’ Mikael Commanded, keeping a Seal for emergencies. ‘Seal her, then do the same to Zion. Given enough time, Artoria and Diana can beat him, but they can’t reach his real body.’

Once they took care of the two entities, the Family would have two of their hardest hitters available and their most flexible member. Emma would retreat to focus on communication and defence beside Mikael, while the others aided Ranni again Gladiator.

From there, Mikael would Free whomever he could as they mopped up, dragging them to the Island to prevent reinfection.

‘As soon as anyone sees Darkseid, retreat,’ Mikael ordered grimly. ‘He’s lurking around here somewhere, waiting for the best moment to strike.’

‘Can you beat him?’ Scathach asked.

‘…Don’t know,’ Mikael said after a moment of hesitation. ‘I will certainly try, though. And I think I have a good chance if I don’t have to worry about collateral damage, so I’ll do it alone. He’s fucked with us for too long.’

Nobody said anything after that.

Emma focused on keeping Medea undisturbed as she chanted Divine Words. She carried the witch in her claws, avoiding what attacks she could and blocking those she couldn’t.

Half didn’t manage to pierce her Haki, while some even managed to damage her Diamond body. Emma’s Aura was on a steady decline, though the largest loss came from her inability to dodge one of those stinging rents in reality.

She had managed to tilt herself away to stay alive and keep Medea undisturbed, but it had cost her. The bolt tore through her Haki, Aura, and Diamond body to completely sever the end of her tail.

It wasn’t a wound that slowed her, despite the pain, but it did force her to expend some of her Aura to close the wound.

But she bought the time Medea needed.

Every second that passed, the white-purple light of a magical circle grew and grew under the Witch of Betrayal's Divine Words. Intricate symbols and arcane glyphs carved into the darkness of space.

The final product was the largest ritual the world ever saw, a third of the size of their home Island. It glowed with Mikael's infinite power and a Dragon of Magic's precise control.

'Done!'

The Diamond Dragon dove toward Eden as fast as she could, taking numerous attacks but remaining as unfaltering as Diamond as she closed in.

As soon as the first ring of purple light enveloped the Entity, Emma stopped, transformed back to human instantly, and took a position behind Medea.

With a clean line of sight on the target, Eden could not escape.

One moment, everything was bathed in a white-purple light.

The next moment, Emma and Medea floated alone in the void of space outside Earth's atmosphere.

'Phew,' Medea sighed mentally. 'I don't know how long that will last without access to their real body or extensive testing on the extent of their weakness to magecraft. It should buy us a few days at least. Give me a second to reapply the invisib-'

Haki flared a warning.

Emma was too slow to react beyond pushing Medea away.

An enormous hand clasped around a Diamond neck.

"If you leave, she dies," Darkseid told Medea.

They were in the void of space, yet his voice carried perfectly to the Servant, who had flown away in the seconds since his appearance.

'Emma?'

'I can't reach anyone else. He's blocking psychic communication.'

The hand squeezed.

Diamond clad in Armament groaned under the pressure.

Darkseid could not sense their communication but knew them to be communicating.

"Lower your protections," the Lord of Tyrrany ordered.

Emma couldn't move her head to look at him, but she saw him through Medea's eyes —inexorable, unmovable.

Darkseid held Emma aloft in one hand with the most casual of ease, looking into the witch's eyes and demanding submission.

"You have lost. Submit. Become one with Darkseid."

Darkseid wasn't in any hurry, but the pressure on Emma's neck grew.

Diamond groaned.

'Mikael will sense us being cut off,' Medea said.

'He only has one Seal left.'

He could only summon one of them if he summoned them at all.

Whether it was teleportation or opening a portal to the Island, each would take a moment.

A moment in which whoever wasn't summoned died.

Neither had been able to react to Darkseid's appearance, even with Haki. He was simply too fast for Emma or Medea's C-rank Agility.

"Submit, or I will force you to watch as I visit hell upon your Family, the likes of which you cannot comprehend."

Diamond cracked.

'Portal to the Island. He can't stop that.'

'Emma?'

'I'll buy you the time. I still have most of my Command Seal.'

Mikael could summon her if Medea could get there in time, and Emma could delay Darkseid enough.

Both knew the chances of that happening.

'I also have a Seal. A full one. I am a Servant. We are already dead.'

'We all died.'

'We can delay him. Mikael can free you.'

'I refuse to be a chain around his neck.'

"Submit or die."

Emma's entire focus was on a Diamond sharp lance of psychic energy.

Stronger than the attack that had blasted through Lightray's defence by orders of magnitude, Emma put everything she had into the blast.

Her Element, her Command Seal, her Semblence.

Everything.

For a second, it worked.

For a second, Emma saw the madness that was Darkseid.

Domination and Tyrrany were his very being. He would never be satisfied until everything that existed or would exist were under a control so total that they would be part of Darkseid himself, indistinguishable from his own limbs.

That madness would have broken Emma Frost.

Emma was not Emma Frost.

She had been born in a madness much greater than this.

So, for a second, Emma saw Darkseid's mind and knew his plan.

In his state, he didn't fear Orion, Scott Free, Mikael, or the Family, even though they were immune to the Anti-Life Equation. He was powerful enough to deal with them all at once.

But this Darkseid had learned patience, and one thing did concern him.

Heartbreak.

This entire invasion had initially been planned to spread the Anti-Life Equation, lure out Orion, and drag Mikael's actual body from his jewelled world.

As soon as Mikael's true body was not protected, Darkseid would kill him before he could use Heartbreak again.

But Mikael was not the one behind Heartbreak.

Emma was.

The target shifted, but the plan didn't. When he discovered her location, Darkseid would never allow her to go free again.

For one second, Darkseid experienced Heartbreak for a second time.

But only for a second.

He was wary of the ability, but not because he feared it.

Darkseid hated it.

More than anything in his entire existence, Darkseid hated the feeling of Heartbreak.

This was not the same Darkseid who had experienced it for the first time.

He was one with the Anti-Life Equation.

He had no heart to break.

The second passed.

A grey-white portal closed.

Diamond shattered.

Truly, Emma Frost could only hurt Mikael.

Author's Note:

... Won't say much. All my thoughts on this chapter and the next will come out after the end.

I'll see you all next week.

DEATH

*"**I. Am. The. New. God.** All is one in Darkseid. This **mighty** body is my church. When I **command** your surrender, I speak with **eight billion** voices. When I make a fist to crush your resistance. It is with **eight billion** hands! When I stare into your eyes and **shatter** your dreams. And **break your heart. It is with sixteen billion eyes! Nothing like Darkseid has ever come among you. Nothing will again. I will take you to a hell without exit or end. And there I will murder your souls! And make you crawl and beg! And die! Die! DIE FOR DARKSEID!"***
*-**Darkseid,** Final Crisis*

It was the end of the world, and I couldn't help but laugh.

The whole world was against me.

Good.

It wouldn't be fair otherwise.

I let another one of Lightray's energy blasts pass through me to crash harmlessly against the Jewel, rematerializing to try and cut off his arm with the Godslaying blade.

He dodged.

Because, of course, he did.

I swear, as soon as we were done with this world, I was finding a way to raise my speed in the next one we visited. It wasn't too much of a problem when I could ambush people, set traps, or prepare countermeasures ahead of time.

But when I couldn't, Comic Bullshit became extra bullshit.

The attack by the New Gods of Genesis had been a surprise, as had the revelation that Darkseid had been framing me as being him, but I honestly wasn't too put out with it. It seemed to be his MO with his current plan, pitting people he couldn't control against each other.

More surprising was that Darkseid had completed the Anti-Life Equation.

In that weird scooter thing that looked so silly in the comics, Orion was able to engage Lightray on a more even footing, speed-wise.

I took the chance to ambush Big Barda with hundreds of Homing Crystal Soul Spears.

It was a veritable ocean of pale blue light that drowned the woman.

She shattered them all.

Fucking comics, man.

Still, I had expected it.

I had spent the last few months working with Medea of Colchis, one of the greatest mages in all of history. My spells had evolved well beyond the limits of the original

Soulsborne games.

The blue tide of crystals shattered, releasing an eruption of Fia's Mist that choked the sky with pale grey energy.

I imagine the woman held her breath, but that didn't really matter for this spell. It wasn't poison.

Big Barda never escaped the cloud.

When it dispersed less than a second later, thanks to the shockwaves of the fight, her body was trapped in a macabre display. Black barbs of roots and vines had erupted from every inch of her body like a pin cushion, trapping her in place as maggots and flies were birthed and started to consume her body.

Deathblight was one of the worst ways to die.

I would know.

The spell initially only worked on Tarnished like I had been, but I had adapted it with Medea and Priscilla's aid to target all 'Life' I wanted. It was as close to a conceptual attack as I could manage, its only weakness being that it acted like a gas, making it slow.

Which made it useless unless I took opponents by surprise.

"What did you do to her?" Scott Free, Mister Miracle himself, asked me as he fought another of his compatriots. I didn't recognize this one off the top of my head.

"She was a big bad barda. I put her in time out."

And it still wasn't enough to kill the New God.

I could sense it like I did with all my kills. Just like I knew the Simurgh had died, I knew Big Barda was still alive, even trapped and being consumed by Deathblight.

I guess it was for the best.

While I wasn't opposed to killing these people, they had attacked me before being controlled, I still preferred to Free them if I could.

The problem was that I still had no idea how they had gotten infected by the Anti-Life Equation in the first place. As far as I knew, they had been on Earth for less than a minute and had not interacted with anything that could have transmitted it to them.

So I either killed them or put them out of the fight until I could deal with Darkseid.

All things considered, things were going well.

Sure, the surprise attack wasn't what we were expecting, but it was honestly for the better, in my opinion than the alien invasion alternative.

By targeting my Family directly, we didn't have to worry about civilian casualties for the most part, which had been the most significant limiting factor in the battle against the Endbringers.

Sure, some battles were literally unwinnable. Artoria and Diana, despite being two of

our strongest, had no way of beating Zion.

We weren't trying to win.

We were trying to stall while keeping most of our opponents alive. Scathach could have slain her enemies pretty quickly if she wanted to, but we all knew they were little more than mindless victims. Slaves to the Anti-Life Equation.

Perhaps the greatest example was Melina's fight against the Fantastic Four, Doctor Doom, and Valeria. More than anything else, that proved that Darkseid no longer needed the emotional component of his plans.

We might have already lost if the Phoenix Force hadn't been actively counteracting Franklin Richard's power.

As it was, Melina was fighting them all with shocking efficiency after semi-separating herself from the psychic entity.

They were one, and they were two. Different, yet the same.

A way to maximize the use of the Phoenix Force while being a substandard host.

Melina wasn't winning, but she wasn't losing either, showing how far she had come from initially becoming a Host of the Phoenix Force.

I was increadibly proud of her. Of all of them.

I couldn't use my main body against most of our foes due to collateral, but I didn't need to.

By not losing, we were winning.

Because some battles would be won eventually. My money was on Caster and Emma sealing Eden, Schatach trapping her foes in a rune, or Raven subduing literally everyone else.

Darkseid even did us a favour by pitching the missing heroes against us. We had been genuinely helpless to find them, but they had delivered themselves to us on a welcome platter.

A cascade would begin as soon as even one of our foes was dealt with, and the others could work together to take down the rest.

Darkseid had to know this.

He was throwing everything in the world against us and failing. If he wanted a chance at victory, at forcing my actual body out, he needed to step forward himself.

We were trying to force a confrontation with Darkseid. He was the key to all this.

Kill him, and we won.

From there, I could Free everyone.

He needed to kill me to win. Otherwise, his control would never be absolute. I would keep Freeing people and resurrecting those who died (In his mind, at least. I probably

wouldn't keep resurrecting people since that would involve Binding them.)

I couldn't deny a small pit of excitement at finally facing this shadowy opponent who had slipped my grasp time and time again.

Who had manipulated me against his enemies.

Who was practically my antithesis in every way.

Death had chosen well.

Darkseid would be my Wall.

'Scathach, are you almost done?' I asked as I ducked underneath a blast from some sort of arrow construct. 'Can you back up, Melina? I'd rather not hurt Valeria if we can help it, creepy little girl or not. And I don't want to give Doom or Reed Richards time to scale up.'

I wanted to say the person attacking me was Antinoos? Maybe? I didn't know much about the New Gods of Genesis since they weren't a significant focus of the comics.

'Scathach?' I asked again as Mister Miracle suplexed…Lonar? Probably Lonar.

Despite it happening right over my Island, I was mainly on the fringes of this fight. New Gods were simply way ahead of my human form in specs, and I was reduced to an onlooker who took potshots when I could aid Orion or Scott Free.

I wasn't opposed to it, as it allowed me to be flexible.

Case in point, I shifted myself almost completely Free of the dimension, letting attack after attack pass through me as I reached out to Scathach through Emma's link to ensure everything was all right.

And found nothing.

Not just Scathach, I could reach nobody at all.

I looked over at the Shadow Clone of Tsunade. She wouldn't know if her original psychic link was also cut off unless another clone dispersed and shared the memory.

And, as I watched, a New God released an electrical blast that popped it. The original would have just tanked it.

I didn't have any psychic powers at all, but I did have Psychic Talent that let me piggyback off of others' abilities, specifically Emma's and Melina's.

This is why, when I focused, I realized I could feel no psychic connection to anyone, I started to get a bit worried.

How long had Emma been out of contact?

Was she focusing on the fight with Eden, or was her ability somehow blocked? It wasn't impossible. Psychic jammers were pretty standard in Marvel, given how widespread telepathy was in the setting.

Emma was immensely powerful by psychic standards, almost ridiculously so, but she

couldn't bypass things without me touching her. She'd have to break them down by force, which could take time.

Still, better safe than sorry.

"Love," I called aloud, and the tiny form of Raven in a purple cloak appeared on my shoulder. Even when Raven and Pride fought almost every Super on this planet, they still left a version with me for safety's sake. "Can you check on Emma and Medea for me? My connection is cut off."

"Got it."

I wasn't too worried about the others, all things considered. Baring Ranni, all of them were fighting on Earth and Raven or Pride could intervene if things got dicey there.

Besides, I had full confidence in my wives. Nothing Darkseid had thrown at them yet was enough to-

Wrong.

Love's face scrunched up.

Wrong.

"I can't reach Emma's shadow."

The world tilted.

"I'm trying Medea's."

Everything was out of line.

Everything was crooked.

Everything was wrong.

"Don't bother."

My voice was wrong.

"Here she is."

The swirl of a magical cloak was wrong.

"Mikael-"

The look of loss and pain on Medea's face was wrong.

"-Darkseid, he-"

This world was wrong.

"Darkseid killed Emma."

My words, the proclamation of what I felt with soul-deep certainty, were right.

And that was wrong.

Emma was dead.

My Emma was dead.

A part of My Life was dead.

My Emma was dead.

Emma was dead.

I felt it the moment it happened, and I felt it when that diamond-bright part of 'Me' died.

I had been holding Medea from the second she appeared, Freeing her from danger.

Protecting her.

"Tell everyone to retreat to the Island."

"Mikael-"

"He's shown his face. Either he wins and enslaves everything, or I do, and I Free everything. Either way, I can do more damage when I am alone and don't need to worry about others."

"…Don't you dare go hollow."

Hollow.

To have a hole or emptiness inside.

A familiar order.

"Don't worry."

A brief memory of waking up in a small stone gazebo in a wide field of tall grass. Of finally being Free of the Kiln. Of a kind woman listening to a broken man cry.

That same woman now carried my children.

That same woman's clone gave the same order.

To that same woman, I gave the same answer.

Only this time, she heard it.

"I can't go hollow."

I carved the returned memory into my mind with Life.

It joined the others, making up 'Me.'

Emma would be annoyed.

She hated it when I reinforced 'Me.'

But Emma was dead.

And I was still Me.

"I'll bring you there."

I nodded to Medea.

Darkseid might have left already, but that wouldn't change the fact that I needed to see it.

To see her.

And, even if he left, I could find him again by knowing where he had been once.

Darkseid would not escape.

With a swirl of a cloak, we left the New Gods and Earth behind.

Darkseid hadn't left.

He stood, floating above the world with his arms behind his back as he waited for me.

Diamond dust sparkled as it floated around him.

That was all of Emma that remained.

Her soul wasn't there for me to bring back.

I'd known I'd never be able to bring back any of my first ten wives with my abilities from Death's patronage.

After all, they had died tens of millions of years ago in long-dead worlds.

Still, as I looked at the shattered remains of the woman I loved, I expected to feel heartbreak.

Sadness.

Rage.

But I didn't.

"Go home, Medea."

I never lost contact with my wife until she teleported away, unwilling to let Darkseid tear anything else from me.

He didn't even try.

Darkseid was in no rush. He hadn't been since the beginning. This was his game to win.

I looked at the being that had killed Emma.

And felt nothing.

"Submit."

I didn't comment on the stupidity of asking someone whose wife he just killed to submit.

"There is no freedom."

I didn't point out that the mere existence of tyranny, the removal of Freedom, means there has to be Freedom to remove.

"There is no life."

I didn't say anything about the fact that his own existence proved there is Life, even if he ignored everything else.

"There is only Darkseid!"

I didn't joke about him speaking in the third person.

I didn't say anything.

I just looked at my enemy.

He was taller than me. Bigger than me.

That wasn't rare. Most of my enemies had towered over me.

What was unique was Darkseid's simplicity.

Despite his power in the comics, I had always considered him an almost silly character.

Yes, he was responsible for countless deaths, dead-end worlds, and the torment of endless slaves, both physical and mental.

But he was comic book evil.

There were plans and complex schemes, but his motivations were as two-dimensional as they came. Darkseid was a quintessential comic villain of the worst type.

He was simple. Boring.

The human touch I so loved, the failings of mortals, the complications of life, motivation, internal struggles, or character growth were all absent from him.

Darkseid simply was.

From beginning to end, he might learn, but he'd never change. He might grow and shrink in power, but Darkseid would always be Darkseid.

I never asked myself what his goal was because I knew it.

Everyone who had ever heard of Darkseid knew it.

Domination. Tyranny.

The subjugation of all realities under Darkseid.

I had admired his complex planning, the net he had weaved around this world, even as I subconsciously looked down on him.

Because he would always be limited to 'Darkseid.'

As he loomed in front of me, a figure of malevolence and evil, I realized something.

That simplicity I had looked down on.

It was the point.

Even now, after everything I had done to stymy his plans, to act as his very antithesis, Darkseid still demanded submission from me. Because he always would. He demanded the submission of everyone and everything.

He wasn't offering mercy, a life free of pain.

Just submission.

I'd still be tortured, still be tormented even if I gave up now. All that would change was how much pain he desired to inflict. It would be proportional to the amount of opposition before submission.

But there would always be pain, of that I had no doubt.

Because that's what tyranny was in its simplest form.

Power over others.

His slightest whim would lead to an eternity of torture.

No complex motivations. No mess of conflicting feelings. No connections to others would hold him back.

There is only Darkseid.

I looked upon a path I could have taken. The simplicity of it.

The power I could have held.

The power that, even now, I could hold with but a thought.

And felt nothing. Empty.

Hollow.

But no matter how empty I was, no matter how tired, I couldn't go hollow.

Because I was Me.

Because I chose to be Me.

No matter how much it hurt.

"You talk too much."

A black hole swallowed Darkseid.

I had let the New God ramble on so long because I had been giving my Family time to retreat and to set up my own countermeasures.

Darkseid would not have stood here waiting for me if he didn't have a plan.

I would just have to break whatever plan he had.

My spell shattered under a punch that distorted space.

"You cannot surprise Darkseid. I see with a trillion eyes."

With his trillion eyes, Darkseid saw my actual Avatar, humanity discarded in place of an abomination beyond mortal minds.

My trillion Eyes, literal not figurative, Called from Beyond and stars rained.

A supernova, powerful enough to burn the moon to ash, bloomed across the darkness of the void.

Darkseid was not daunted by my display of enough firepower to make a pyromaniac orgasm.

Two lines of red light erupted from his eyes, moving faster than I could follow.

The first travelled straight, impacting my Call Beyond and halting the nova in its tracks.

The second zigzagged around the blast and hit me.

The Omega Effect was Darkseid's most potent weapon, baring the Anti-Life Equation itself.

His Omega Beams were faster than speedsters, never missed, and disintegrated the targets they touched. Anything destroyed in that way he could later bring back, only to repeat the process repeatedly.

He could also inflict other cruelties, such as atomic dissociation or forcefully trapping people in a succession of fake lives, each more hopeless than the last.

Darkseid used the Omega Beams to torture slaves that were too useful to kill outright, breaking them until they submitted.

That was probably what he hoped to do to me.

Tentacles, eyes, and blades burned under the Omega Beams.

And… that was it.

For the first time, I saw Darkseid surprised.

Hundreds of mouths opened across the monstrosity that I had become.

In a discordant rictus of mirth that transmitted sound through the void of space, I laughed at the monster who had taken Emma.

“It’s NOT goIng to Be thaT eASy.”

It wasn’t arrogance that had me facing Darkseid one-on-one. I had a few tricks up my tentacles.

The Company Defences, when taken to their full extent, operated best the more absolute the thing they were defending against was.

A low-tech camera would see me well while the greatest mages’ spells could not.

A simple punch could hurt me, but something meant to completely disintegrate me barely singed.

“The Bat knew how to kill you months ago,” Darkseid answered, eyes narrowed. “For Darkseid, it takes but a thought.”

“tHen THinK harDER.”

Wrathful spirits flew from me, a wave of pale skulls in the hundreds of thousands.

Darkseid waved a hand, pulsing with red power, and they were consumed in a portal to who knows where.

Space opened behind the New God, and thirteen eyes poured curses on him.

He didn’t even flinch, flicking a hand, and my eyes burst in a squelch of pale blood.

Meteorites, crystals, fire, lightning, or even Fia’s Mist.

Darkseid dealt with it all with a wave of his hands or a blast of the Omega Beams.

He wasn’t even trying.

I knew he wasn’t because he was deliberately moving at a speed I could follow.

That arrogance would be his undoing.

A tiny hand opened near one of my eyes, a thumb raised.

A shadow covered the planet, protecting it in a dark cocoon that blended it into the darkness of space.

Raven was going all in on the defence.

She needed to.

My Terra Magica bloomed across the whole planet, a ritual circle larger than Earth that glowed a pale white.

Darkseid couldn't see it; he was drowned by the phantasmal dragon heads I had unleashed around him, trapping him in a cataclysm of destruction.

Fire, lightning, rot, glintstone, ice, magma, and ruin.

I unleashed it all on Darkseid.

As a distraction.

He shattered Dragon Communion Incantations with a punch to see my actual body.

Six white wings and a tail, all wrapped around a body larger than most countries, as I curled into a ball.

Rennala's Full Moon was larger than Earth's actual moon.

It crashed into the New God's face.

The explosion of white light could have destroyed the sun.

Darkseid's skin was scuffed.

"Useless. Useless. USELESS!"

Darkseid *moved.*

His hands grasped the space around me and *squeezed.*

I Free'd myself from space, and his attack passed me harmlessly.

"Resistance is useless!"

Attack after attack passed through me harmlessly, whether it was my Avatar or when he tried to attack my true body.

I was Free from everything he tried to throw at me.

"Submit! Or I shall destroy everything you hold dear!"

I received a brief image from Melina.

I saw Wonder Woman, Superman, Eidolon, and dozens of other heroes. They were on my Island, trying to tear through the bounded field that kept my home separated from the rest. My wives held them off, the home-field advantage almost absolutely under Medea's control.

I understood what had happened when I saw Victoria among the attackers.

I had kept my distance from Glory Girl, content to let her live her life at a distance for the most part so I wasn't at risk of succumbing to her orders. Naturally, that also meant I hadn't told her about Darkseid.

The Defences only worked so long as you wanted them to. All Darkseid would have had to do was threaten Amelia, and Glory Girl could have lowered them and succumbed to the Anti-Life Equation.

Still, Darkseid had made a mistake in having them invade my Island.

My true body kept up the barrage on the New God as my Avatar teleported back.

Dozens of tentacles reached out to everyone, attacking my home, wrapping around them and Freeing them from the Anti-Life Equation.

My Avatar was torn apart.

What?

I was overcome with shock as, rather than be free of the control, the heroes pulled my body to shreds.

“I know you, worm!” Darkseid laughed as my true body. “I know your limits! The weakness you live with! You are a coward who cannot enforce your will. These heroes, these slaves, chose servitude. They chose DARKSEID! And so will you, or I shall force you to watch as I kill and despoil your Family! All you love will be ashes!”

Knowing what I did from meta knowledge didn’t even take me a second to understand what was happening.

The premise of the Anti-Life Equation was that it was mathematical proof all life, hope, and freedom are pointless. It forcefully confronted those who saw it with this proof, ‘killing’ them in the process as they were unable to deal with that kind of knowledge.

I had thought my ability to Free people worked against it, a hard counter.

Who would ever want to be a slave, after all?

I had been asking myself the wrong question.

Who would want to face all that pain? Who would choose suffering? Why not give up when confronted with the pointlessness of it all?

I couldn’t even blame them. I had wanted to give up before.

I hadn’t been able to, forced to suffer because of Diana’s order.

The revelation shocked me, but not enough to stop me.

I felt guilty for Victoria for bringing her back only to fail to adequately prepare her.

But she was not Mine.

I brought her back from the dead, and with a thought to the dead, she returned.

Victoria’s body dissolved into nothing as I ceased keeping her bound.

The rest of the attackers suddenly found they could not touch anything around them. I had Freed my pocket dimension of them, and now they were flying over Earth’s ocean, unable to interact with my home.

The Jewel was a part of me; I was always touching it, even when I was far away.

Once I killed Darkseid, I’d bring Victoria back and apologize.

For now, I had a New God to kill.

As much as I had been surprised by the revelation of being able to Free the heroes,

Darkseid was just as surprised by how easily I handled the situation.

He had probably planned to grab another one of my wives and force us to lower our defences or watch them die like Emma.

That would not be happening.

The ritual was finished.

The Terra Magica flashed.

As a Dragon of Life and Freedom, I was much better suited towards defence and utility than offence.

Still, I knew how to pack a punch.

Every spell, every incantation, every pyromancy had been compacted into one little container of glintstone. If I hadn't maintained constant magical contact with the spell, freeing it from the limits of space, it would have been bigger than my Island.

As it was, it was smaller than an atom.

The Comet Azure that erupted was almost invisible compared to the titanic draconic mouth that released it.

Darkseid screamed as the pale white spell pierced through space and his chest.

It was the most beautiful sound I had heard in years.

It still wasn't enough to kill the tyrant.

So, I added another.

"IF YOU WILL NOT SUBMIT!"

And another.

"YOU WILL DIE!"

A dozen.

A hundred.

A thousand atom-wide Comet Azures, packed with every death I could think of, blasted toward the man who had taken Emma from me.

Darkseid was more holes than body.

Yet he still wouldn't die.

"SO DECLARES DARKSEID!!!"

My burgeoning Haki tried to warn me.

It was already too late.

Localized invincibility.

That was what this new power was called. He didn't know how he knew, and he didn't know how it worked.

All Barry Alen knew was that he needed to run.

And run.

And run.

He ran for weeks in which lifetimes passed.

Time lost all meaning at this speed.

He didn't eat. He didn't sleep.

The Flash ran.

Beyond time, space, and light.

Yet the moment of truth came almost in slow motion to the hero.

Batman had told him he was the best hope for stopping the Elden Lord.

Batman had told him that there would be a moment when Mikael would have to be in real space when he attacked.

Bruce told Barry that the Flash was their only hope to save the world from the dragon.

So Barry ran as fast as he could with a laugh.

He had always wanted to be a hero in a fairy tale.

It looks like he would get to slay a dragon, after all.

There was no pain.

It was too fast for pain.

One moment, I was.

The next, I wasn't.

******

Darkseid looked upon the remains of what was once the 'Elden Lord' and, with an errant thought, disintegrated the speedster with his Omega Beams; his purpose served.

A useful slave. No point in letting him die due to not being able to breathe.

No satisfaction or pride filled him as his body healed from the dragon's final attack.

Why would it?

This was but a sideshow, an interlude to get rid of an annoyance, before he moved on to his primary target.

The only emotion that crossed Darkseid's mind as he flew off to confront his son, his nemesis, was a bit of pity.

The Elden Lord's death was a waste of a useful slave.

His dealing with Trigon, the annoyance of the gods, and bringing that Blood to this world had all been boons he hadn't been expecting but accelerated his plans by decades.

Darkseid truly hoped, as much as a being like him could hope, that the Elden Lord was just as immortal as he was.

Orion had done one thing right. His hunt of Darkseid through the multiverse had

given the ruler of Apokoplips the perfect way to break foes.

Whether it was Orion, his ungrateful ward Scott Free, or the Elden Lord, Darkseid would hunt them down, time and time again.

Until they submitted.

Untill all was Darkseid.

******

While Darkseid went off to his dramatic confrontation with his son, both armed with the Anti-Life Equation, to hold a battle that would rock reality and determine the fate of this multiverse.

While twelve women, in a home that seemed so empty now, tried to decode what had just happened. While grief, pain, and loss threatened to take them as it started to sink in that Mikael had lost.

That Mikael had died.

While the world ended.

A fat cat with two tiny wings too small for its chubby body started to hack.

Medea the cat coughed. She wheezed and hacked, back arching as she gasped and wretched at empty air.

Even amidst the shock and loss, the grief and pain, the Family was not the type to lose themselves to the degree where they would allow one of their own to suffer when they could do anything about it.

Within the first few seconds of Medea's sudden inability to breathe, Robin had scooped the tubby floof in her arms and carried her to Tsuande, even as the cat continued to wheeze and hack.

"The continued existence of the Jewel and this Island means that he is not-"

Medea's tear-filled explanation was cut off as eyes turned to the pain-filled coughing of the cat that bore her name.

"What's wrong with her?" Priscilla asked worriedly to the former Hokage.

"I don't know," Tsunade answered. "I'm not a vet. I can't find anything wrong with her." Her voice, in contrast, was almost as dead as Mikael's had been when he left to fight Darkseid.

Once more, she had outlived someone she loved.

"Hairball?" Yorucihi joked weakly.

"She's technically a familiar," Scathach answered grimly. "If Mikael…"

Nobody said it.

They just watched Medea's body hack and wheeze pitifully.

It almost looked like the cat was crying.

Like she was wailing in grief for the man who had raized her and loved her and who wouldn't be coming home.

Medea slumped, all struggle and fight leaving her.

"Mrow."

One last pitiful mewl as the chubby cat gave up, hanging limply from Tsunade's arms.

From the chubby cat's limp head, her mouth opened.

And opened.

And opened some more.

From the hole in reality, roughly the size of a human fist, something fell to the ground with a wet 'Plop.'

Even used to weirdness as the Family was, they stared at the object that had fallen from Medea's mouth for a long second.

It was a heart.

A red, bloody, and all too human heart.

And it was pumping blood.

More than blood.

With every beat of the heart, red ichor coagulated around it and grew. And grew. And grew.

Within the first few seconds of falling out of Medea's mouth, the human heart had been covered by layers of blood and flesh.

"QUICKLY!" Medea, the witch, shouted. "Throw it in the ocean!"

Diana didn't hesitate, grabbing the still-growing pile of flesh and throwing it out a nearby window.

"MROW!!!" Medea wailed in distress as the heart sailed out over the cliff edge and into the water, still growing.

"That bastard," Tsunade hissed, smile wide even as tears flowed from her eyes. "That absolute bastard."

"I wonder," Robin asked airily, but her voice was tinged with relief. "Did he hide this plan from us intentionally? As a backup? Or did he just forget?"

"Knowing our Lord Husband, it could be either."

"Irrelevant," Glynda said sternly as she adjusted her glasses, pretending she hadn't subtly wiped her eyes. "He's cut off for at least a week."

"A month," Raven deadpanned.

"Let's not be hasty," Pride hurridly said to herself. "Don't punish us all for Daddy's

idiocy."

"We'll start the count once he has a human body again," Melina agreed, looking out over the ocean where the heart had fallen. "He'll try to weasel out of it, trust me. But he won't learn if we don't stand united."

Already, it was starting to surge as Mikael began the long process of regrowing his sub-continent-sized actual body.

"And what of her punishment?" Artoria asked, looking at the fat cat still held in Tsunade's arms.

Great big kitty tears beaded the cat's eyes at seeing her meal disappear into the water. Every once in a while, pitiful mewls escaped her lips, and she tried to flap her tiny wings to escape the woman's grasp to chase after it.

Tsunade was having none of it and held on to the cat firmly.

"Is she not suffering enough?" Priscilla, moved by pity, asked.

"""No."""

"No leftovers for a week," Yoruichi said as she grabbed whiskered cheeks and kneaded them like dough.

"MROW!" Medea yowled, sounding like she was actually dying. Not from Yoruichi's face squishing, of course, but from the threat of losing her food. The tubby cat looked to her only hope for salvation. "Mew?"

"You scared Mommy to death," Medea chastised. "You're on dry food. For a week!"

Medea began to cry.

The Family wasn't whole, there was a glaring hole in the room.

But so long as Mikael was alive, there was hope for Emma to return.

Three days.

They had three days before the Warranty Plan was supposed to bring her back.

Everything would depend on what happened in three days.

******

She found him sitting in the ashes.

"How long have you been here?" Diana asked softly.

"A few hours. How'd you find me?"

"Mo- Hippolyta saw you. She comes here regularly and let me know you were here."

"I didn't notice her. Do the others know?"

"I haven't told them yet. I wanted to see how you were first. Medea might find you, though. She's looking for that one."

“Why? What did she do?”

“Scared us to death when she was hacking up your heart. She’s been on dry food for the last few days and been trying to sneak food every chance she can.”

“…I didn’t know. She appeared as soon as I built my Avatar.”

“You got better,” Diana complimented, sitting beside Mikael. Her movement sent a swirl of grey ashes through the air.

Mikael didn’t react. His only movement was the continual petting of the tubby cat sitting and purring on his lap with stubby tentacles.

His hair was still a wriggling mass of blades and barbs, and his skin was still the pale, milky white of an infant Great One. The occasional tentacle, fin, blade, eye, or mouth sprouted here and there.

But he was unmistakably Mikael now.

No longer was he the deformed monstrosity, flickering in and out of reality as space bent over himself. Nor was he the admittedly cute miniature squid baby. He was human-shaped, roughly the size he was supposed to be, and had distinct facial features.

Facial features as blank emotionally as Diana had ever seen them.

“Thanks. Fourth time’s the charm. Another day or two, and I’ll look the same as before.”

Which was good because they didn’t have Panacea to fall back on.

They didn’t have anyone but each other.

“Why didn’t you tell us about your heart?”

“Didn’t know it would work. I did it on a whim one day while feeding her. Basic lich-phylactery type thing, only better. It’s not a second Avatar, if that’s what you are wondering. It’s technically still part of my main body, still connected to the spot I removed it from. Like a quantum field. I simply ‘Freed’ two points of space from regular space-time, like when I let things pass through me.”

“And fed one to Medea,” Diana couldn’t help but shake her head.

“A whim,” Mikael repeated. “I was already feeding her parts of my Avatar, I figured it was worth the shot. I don’t know the smallest point I can regenerate from, but it should be anything that counts as ‘Me.’ I define myself as my head and heart, more metaphysically than biologically, so it was good odds that I could regenerate from one or the other. I was right. There were much larger chunks of me left over from Flash’s attack, but I regenerated here.”

“And you didn’t tell us because you didn’t want to give us false hope?”

“That’s one of the reasons. The other is Medea herself. She treats it like an endless source of food. Like one of those candies you hold in your mouth layer after layer. I

constantly regenerated it within her stomach, so it wouldn't be destroyed. That's another reason it's so small: regenerating it wouldn't impact my other abilities."

"…You forgot to tell us, didn't you?"

"…"

"…And you've already given her another, haven't you?"

"So long as she lives, so too will I."

"How strong is she by now?"

"Who knows. Continuously eating my blood nonstop? I'm guessing she's already Tier 10, but all she uses her power for is eating."

Not once had Mikael spoken with even the slightest hint of emotion since Diana had found him here, even as he talked and petted the cat he loved, even as he spoke of his loss to Darkseid.

"You don't believe Emma will return, do you?"

"…The best case scenario is that My—our Emma returns. In that case, from this day forth, your lives and deaths will be determined by The Company. Every time you die, your return will be up to them. And even if you do come back every time, there will always be the possibility you will never be able to not return- To always be forced to Live."

Mikael finally did something that wasn't petting Medea.

With a movement as simple as turning his head that seemed so impossibly inhuman, he looked at Diana.

"To come back to Life is a blessing I am praying for. To be unable to die is a curse I would only wish on my worst enemy. That possibility will hang over us for the rest of our existence. We will always be at their whims."

And that was the best outcome.

Neither of them brought up the other possible outcomes.

"If…" Diana hesitated but pushed forward. "If she does comeback, if she's our Emma, you are planning on leaving, aren't you?"

"There's no point sticking around. We'll travel the multiverse, getting stronger and come back to kick Darkseid's ass when we can. We are in no rush. We have eternity."

"Just like that? Give up and run away?" Despite the words, there was no accusation in Diana's voice.

"I've lost countless times. I've run away countless more. Once more doesn't matter. We can't beat him now, so we'll return when we can."

"And all the people he's controlling? All the pain he's inflicting? We'll just leave them to their fate for who knows how long?"

"I can't do anything about it."

“Cities are becoming dens of pain and suffering. It’s a bloodbath out there. People are fighting and killing, and they feel all of it. They are forced to feel all of it. The suffering is triggering X-genes or shard awakenings. People are doing unspeakable things for power. Darkseid is creating an army of Supers to spread his reign of terror through the multiverse.”

“That was probably his plan all along. Using the Entities to turn this world into the new Apokolips for his endless conquest. I guess Earth will continue to live up to its reputation.”

“…Those who don’t become Supers are becoming Beasts from all the bloodletting. Those that do gain power are becoming closer to Kin.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Mikael didn’t sound angry as he looked at her with helpless eyes.

Just tired.

“Nothing,” Diana shook her head softly. “I am not asking you to do anything. You’ve done your best. The entire reason there is hope left is because of who you are. I am not asking you to do what you cannot do. I am simply explaining my reasoning.”

“…Diana?”

The amazon looked down at the bracers on her wrist and the small strips of leather poking out. A silly little bit of sex play had come to mean so much more to her.

Mikael really was an absurd existence to make her feel this way about simple leather cuffs.

“If Emma comes back, we’ll have proof that the Warranty Plan works,” the heroine said softly. “And I am also a Dragon of Freedom. Freedom for others.”

“Didn’t you hear? People don’t want to be free. They gave up.”

“You know that’s wrong. Just because someone can’t confront the futility of all Life doesn’t mean they want to be slaves to Darkseid,” Diana denied with a glare. Then she softened her tone again. “But that’s not the point. So long as you live, I will always come back. I’ve fought Darkseid many times. I might not be able to beat him, but he will also not be able to completely stop me. I can buy time for you to grow.”

“Diana…”

“I won’t be alone,” Wonder Woman continued, looking away from his pleading eyes. “Hippolyta wants to help, as do the rest of the Amazons. Darkseid killed their gods and still had her daughters. If you Bind them, they won’t fall to the Anti-Life Equation unless they choose to and will also come back to life. And, since you are leaving, you won’t need to worry about them giving you orders.”

“You expect me to leave you to fight an eternal war without a hope of victory? Expect

to let you die and die again? You expect me to be able to be happy with that? To be able to live while you die?"

There was the anger. The rage.

It was so much better than the emptiness.

Diana looked her husband in the eyes, running a hand along his pale cheek as she spoke sadly.

"We lived like that."

It was like she had punched him.

Mikael flinched from her touch, his entire body rippling as Diana's words reminded him of a truth.

They had been in that position, helpless to do anything but wait as someone they loved fought an eternal war.

"I expect you will never force us to be someone we are not." Diana hated seeing him like this. Hated having to use his own words against him. "I expect you to honour the deal we made."

Every word seemed to hurt him just a tiny bit more, and Diana closed her eyes, choking back her tears.

"This is too much, Diana," Mikael croaked. "You can't win. You might not even slow him down."

"Heroes don't fight because they'll win," Wonder Woman said softly. "They fight because it's the right thing to do. There's always another fight, another life to save, and another injustice to be righted. You were right. Heroes don't get happy endings. So, please. Honour your promise to support us. Trust me to be a hero. And I'll trust you to find our happy ending."

"I hate heroes."

"And you love them."

Diana knew she was hurting him. Knew she'd hurt the others with this choice.

Either Emma returned, and they'd lose her, or she didn't.

No matter what, Mikael would lose someone.

But it was Diana's choice because she couldn't live with herself if she didn't fight.

Even if she couldn't save this world, even if another Earth, so similar to her original home, was forever lost to the Anti-Life Equation, delaying Darkseid's expansion by even a few days before Mikael's return could save countless lives and countless other worlds from bad ends.

Too many times in her life had Wonder Woman seen the difference a few seconds could make between victory and tragedy.

Diana would not be a hero, not the woman Mikael fell in love with, if she didn't fight.

"…Have you told the others?"

"No," Diana denied. "I only had the idea when talking to Hippolyta just now when she asked me to let them fight Darkseid."

"Artoria will probably join you," Mikael said sadly. "Maybe Raven or Scathach. They're heroes too, after all."

While Diana wouldn't deny she did not want to be alone in this fight, there was an issue.

"You and Melina are still our best chance to eventually stop him for good," Diana shook her head. "I am just buying time. I do not want to leave you without our heavy hitters."

"I don't think even Melina, with full control of the Phoenix Force, can stop Darkseid while he has merged with the Anti-Life Equation."

"Then you need to find a way," Diana said, standing up. "I know you will. You always do. Besides, I-"

"There you are!"

Diana's words were cut off as Medea appeared in a swirl of her cloak, sending the ashes around them spiralling into the air once again.

"You are still in trouble, Mikael!" Medea's tirade against the fat cat was interrupted when she saw the humanoid figure it sat on.

Immediately, the witch rushed over and hugged the man tightly.

The Caster did not say anything for a long moment, just holding the man in her arms.

Diana understood. She might have acted the same if she hadn't known to expect him here.

"I'm sorry," Medea eventually said, pulling away from Mikael.

"For what?"

"For not saving Emma."

"Not your fault. Darkseid killed her. He's to blame. Me too."

"You are-"

Mikael held up a hand to stop Diana's protests. His tentacle-fingers wiggled.

"I am not fully blaming myself for her death, but there is no denying that my arrogance played a big part in it. In our lack of preparation. If I had Raven focusing on our own support rather than trying to save the world, she might have been able to teleport you two away in time."

"None of us went against our plan," Medea pointed out with a frown.

"No, but I was the one who made it. And I made it because I let my arrogance get the

better of me."

"What do you mean?" Diana asked.

While Mikael made jokes and behaved in an egotistical manner most of the time, she knew it was primarily a facade for humour's sake. He was an 'egotist' in the sense that he saw the world through his own lens, but the person he was most strict on was himself.

"I bought into my own myth," Mikael said, turning from them and looking around the ash-covered Kiln. "I saw Darkseid as a rival, in a way. A Wall to overcome for me to grow stronger. Death chose this world to force me to grow, knowing I couldn't beat Darkseid unless I became Tier 11. I made the plan assuming he thought the same way, that I was his opposite he needed to get rid of. I was wrong. It was never about me. He spent more effort dealing with Orion and Mister Miracle than with me."

Diana grimaced at the memory of that fight. She and a few others had seriously debated helping the New Gods, but with Mikael healing and Emma already dead, as well as their lack of a way to kill Darkseid, only Raven and Robin had helped since they could do it safely.

In the end, it hadn't mattered.

After a climactic battle, Darkseid killed his son and adopted son, ushering in the current state of the world.

"I was just a curiosity with power—another slave he would eventually break. I had wives I loved and people I cared about—all points of weakness he could use, just like everyone else. Even if Darkseid didn't believe he could kill me permanently, he just didn't care. I wasn't a rival, I wasn't even a threat. I was just an annoyance."

"You are thinking too lowly of yourself. There is no doubt that he was conscious of your moves," Medea shook her head. "He would not have had so many plans to use against you if he wasn't. He would have attacked the New Gods and ignored us if we truly didn't matter."

"Maybe," Mikael allowed with a slow nod. "Still, it doesn't change the fact that my plan indirectly allowed him to kill Emma."

"Is that why you're here? To punish yourself?"

Almost in response to Diana's question, a cold breeze blew through the Kiln of the First Flame, sending more ash swirling in the air.

"Nothing so dramatic," Mikael denied, his voice completely empty once more. "This place… I hate it. I hate it so much. But it is a part of me. Except for the Dream, I've spent more time in this Kiln than I have out of it. I am using those memories to recenter myself before meeting everyone again. A reminder that I am not some sort of destined protagonist. I am only me."

Mikael looked out over the dunes of ash, the burned rubble once was the Kild of the First Flame.

"That is enough for us."

Mikael didn't respond for a long second, eyes transfixed on the Kiln.

Diana wondered what he saw.

"I'll be back at the mansion before Emma is supposed to return," Mikael said, expecting them to leave him. He wanted to be alone.

Diana would give him that time to think and be alone while telling the others of his return, knowing that sometimes he needed his space.

Medea, however, had something to ask.

"Emma… She said something to me before I left."

"Hm?" Mikael made a sound of acknowledgement, still staring out over the Kiln.

"I was trying to convince her to stall for time so you could Free her. She wouldn't allow me to. She said she refused to be a chain around your neck."

"Huh."

"I don't think she was talking about our ability to order your Avatar. I think about something else. Something you know about."

Mikael didn't say anything, just scratching his cat as his flesh wiggled and rearranged itself to be closer to human form.

"It's not how I would put it. Less of 'chains around the neck,' and more of a cage, though. Or maybe a cast? I guess the metaphor doesn't really matter. But yes, Emma is right."

"In what way," Diana asked warily, walking around to look Mikael in his eyes.

He paused, staring off beyond her as his pale lips pursed.

Weirdly enough, despite the inhuman features of his face, Diana recognized the look. Mikael sometimes got like that when he was thinking about how to convey his thoughts in a way that would make sense to others.

"Can you love the wind?" He eventually asked out of nowhere.

"What?" Diana responded.

"More importantly, can the wind love you?"

Medea, however, seemed to understand something from his absurd questions.

"You can love the wind," she nodded. "But the wind will never love you. Inherent in its nature, in its existence, is the phenomenon of transience. Of always moving, never being fully contained."

"Exactly," Mikael nodded. "Diana, you're a hero, through and through. But that is because you choose to be. There are countless universes where you are not, where you

either retired, never left your home, or made some other choice and hung up the lasso. The wind can't choose to be anything else than the wind. It simply is."

"What are you trying to say with this," Wonder Woman asked.

"That's the difference between Tier 10 and 11," Mikael said softly. "Both can have infinite power. Some Tier 10s might even have more than some Tier 11s. It is a difference in quality. One is a being, the other is a part of the universe, a piece of nature."

"Like the Phoenix Force," Diana understood that much, at least. "Are you saying we are holding you back from becoming Tier 11?"

"Yes," Mikael said plainly, not sugarcoating his words. "I know two ways to reach that threshold, one for each of my Elements. You know the second one already. The Phoenix Force. It is already the embodiment of Life in this universe. I am a perfect host for it. Merging with it would elevate me, but it also wouldn't. Because the being that emerged from that union wouldn't be me; it would be something else. Closer to a child between me and the Phoenix. I am not really becoming Tier 11. I am creating something that will be Tier 11 with my memories."

"But you have another way," Diana said. "One to become an embodiment of Freedom. And we are holding you back from it."

"I had this thought."

Diana realized Mikael was smiling. The inhuman nature of his face had made it harder to notice, but he was definitely smiling.

"It was a thought that came to me the moment I was free, the moment Emma woke me up. I had served my sentence and had all of eternity to look forward to with you all the benefits the Catalogue had provided. I had my happily ever after. But I had this thought; Why limit myself?"

Diana had seen countless smiles on Mikael's face before. Most of his life was spent smiling, laughing and joking. But this was not a smile of joy or mirth.

"I was Free, wasn't I? Why limit myself to just this? Just this body, just this universe. I could do it. I just had to Free myself of everything. Why limit myself to all these painful memories? Hadn't I earned it? Hadn't I suffered enough? Why couldn't I live out that wish-fulfillment fantasy anyone who filled out that Catalogue has? Why not travel the multiverse, seeing what I wanted, doing what I wanted? Why care? Why not enjoy myself, as Free as the wind?"

It was a smile of relief. The smile of a man coming home from work, exhausted and worn down, and finally being able to sleep.

Mikael was tired, and rest called him.

"That is what it would mean to be a Tier 11 embodiment of Freedom. I'd be free of

my past and future. I'd be free of sorrow and joy. I'd be free of all consequences. Love and hatred. I'd be free of the phantom of the First Flame burning my soul. I'd be free of the pain of losing people. I'd be free of loneliness. I'd be free of the Company, Death, or anything. I'd be free of the chains that were 'Mikael.'"

The smile faded.

Shoulders hunched as exhaustion returned.

"If all of you weren't here, I'd have taken that option. I'd become Freedom. And I'd have died for it. I would have discarded everything that made me 'Me,' all for Freedom. It is the opposite of everything I hate about mind control, but the end result is indistinguishable. I wouldn't be Me. Because I am my pain, my memories, my love and hatred. I am the consequences of my actions. My plans gone wrong, my terrible jokes, my connections. It makes up 'Me.'"

Mikael looked up at Diana, meeting her eyes, draconic and alien blending together in a rictus of a kaleidoscope of reds, oranges, and black.

"I am obsessed with this thing called 'Self.' The loss of self, the erasure of self, the replacement of self. It all stems from fear of that. You all are part of it. Every memory with you, I carve into myself using my Life Element. Every second with you all reminds me why I choose to be Me. You are Mine. By having things be Mine, I confirm that 'I' exist. That the Mikael trapped in a cell, the Mikael burning in this Kiln, the Mikael discarding his humanity as he faced his fear, and the Mikael here and now are all the same person."

"And Emma knew about this?"

"She was in my mind when I had the thought," Mikael answered Medea with a sigh. "Just another way I hurt her. But I couldn't help it. She might see nothing wrong with discarding everything for me, but I do. That's not what I want."

"What do you want, Mikael?" Diana asked.

"I want to fly," he answered immediately. "I never wanted to be an overpowered protagonist with a harem of women at my beck and call. I took the Deal to fly through the multiverse, see impossible sights and do impossible things. All I ever wanted was to be me."

Unlike everyone else, Mikael's elements did not come from himself. He chose them while filling out a form for a short story. He never wanted to be an embodiment of Freedom or Life.

He had been a simple man, similar to everyone else, placed in an extraordinary situation.

"Everything else, despite the pain and loss, has been much more than I ever hoped for. My life is fantastic. I have a Family that loves me, and I love in return. Despite my

caution, I am powerful enough that most things can't hurt me. I have met and had drinks with some of my favourite characters, fought villains and gods, saved lives, and traded jokes with the devil. And all that? That wouldn't have been possible if I did not choose to be 'Me.'"

It was exhausting, painful, and filled with loss and mistakes, but Mikael chose to face that battle every second of every day—to not give up.

Despite herself, despite the recent loss of a woman she considered a friend, despite the imminence of a never-ending battle she had no hope of winning, Diana couldn't help but smile.

Falling in love with a man like this had been the right thing to do.

******

We sat in the living room in silence.

It was almost time.

So much rode on what would happen in the next few seconds.

Would My Emma come back?

And, if so, what then?

Diana hadn't yet mentioned her plan to the others, wanting to know if Warranty Plan actually worked before doing so.

On the one hand, I appreciated her effort to communicate with me, like I had asked her to.

On the other suction cup, I had no idea what to do.

It seemed like no matter what happened, I would lose someone.

Sure, Diana's plan would only be temporary until we found a way to deal with Darkseid. We would, I knew that. The multiverse was vast, and nobody was unbeatable, but that didn't change the fact that if I got Emma back, I'd lose Diana for who knows how many years as she fought and died.

Maybe not just her, either.

I distracted myself with my continued attempts to return to human form. Without Panacea, it was slow going. My skin tone was a more human colour now, but my hair still looked more like the Moon Presence than anything else.

At least Medea was happy, munching away on one of my tentacles.

Nobody had the heart to tell the cat off for breaking her diet.

"How long left," Tsunade asked from beside me.

"Any second," I answered. "There were some clauses about quicker returns based on

the number of ‘amazons’ bound, but I don’t think that applies with Black Mark.”

“Maybe you should go grab Wonder Mom,” Yoruichi joked, trying to lighten the mood. “You did say she had a thing for you.”

“I don’t think I am in any state to ‘grab’ anyone.”

The mood fell again.

“Sorry,” I sighed, rubbing my face with a hand that only had a few blades and mouths poking out. “I’m just… tired, is all. The waiting is the worst.”

“I think we all are,” Medea said, getting affirmative nods around the room. “We’ve been in limbo for three days now. I trust everyone has given thought to how we need to proceed.” More nods. “Once Emma is back, we have a few options to discuss—worlds that might give us the tools to deal with Darkseid.”

“I don’t think any of our home worlds, or those similar to them at least, have what we need,” Tsunade shook her head. “We need to be thinking in terms of more out-of-context solutions. That has been our greatest advantage so far.”

“I have been going through the library,” Robin nodded. “There are a few worlds with potential. Particularly those based on Eastern Daoist or similar principles. They might offer a way to reach Tier 11 without sacrificing our individuality.”

It took me to realize what Robin was talking about, on top of realizing that she had been watching me while I spoke to Medea and Diana in the Kiln.

“Cultivation worlds?” I asked incredulously.

“Exactly,” Robin nodded. “We need to find worlds where any power we can gain is not limited to those with inherent traits, like chakra. On top of that, we all possess Martial Talent, Soul Talent, and Psychic Talent, which generally covers the three common aspects of cultivation, as I understand it. We also have our Elements, which I believe will give us the direction for growth.”

“That is…” I shuddered. “We’ll put that on the maybe pile, and only if we find the right kind of world. Besides, any sort of cultivation that would allow us to deal with Darkseid will take time, even with talent—centuries or millennia.”

I had read more than a few Xianxia stories in my day, as well as similar genres, both Western and Eastern-based. I wasn’t unaware of their potential for power, with our advantages from the Catalogue, but I hadn’t intended to go anywhere near that part of the multiverse.

If comics were insane, then those universes were downright bat-shit.

How else do you describe worlds where egotistical maniacs could sneeze and erase trillions of lives? Or casually rearrange entire universes on a whim?

“If t’would take so long, I shall have mastered mine Order by then,” Ranni joined in.

“Counteracting the Oppressor in this world would be possible.”

“The problem is that Darkseid isn’t limited to this world,” Diana pointed out. “He’s expanding his power every second. Any plan we devise needs to consider that he is not stagnant. He will spread to others once he fully conquers this universe, and his control will grow exponentially.”

I grimaced at the reminder. Dragon Blood wasn’t the only way to grow in Tiers. Raven had reached Tier 10 by absorbing her father. Darkseid certainly should have been stronger than Trigon, but not to the degree he was now.

Merging with the Anti-Life Equation had pushed him to Tier 11, and even if I eventually find some way to reach that same level without losing ‘Myself,’ he might have already assimilated every part of this multiverse under his control.

While I don’t think he could reach Tier 12 with Death around, he would still be at the limit of his Tier. That was one of the reasons I hadn’t been able to argue against Diana’s plan to slow him down.

“Should we give up?” Melina asked the room. “Take our survival as a win and leave? We are not confined to the same limits as Darkseid. We can go where he will never reach. And there are countless other universes in just as dire straights as this one. This will simply be another bad end.”

I could see everyone giving the kindling maiden’s word genuine thought.

“From a tactical standpoint, you are correct,” Artoria nodded imperiously. “We have already fought and done our best for this world. It would not be wrong to say that without us, there would have been no hope at all. There are other worlds out there. Other battles to fight. Choosing to retreat in front of a superior enemy is not cowardice.”

I closed my eyes, a helpless smile tugging up at my lips.

“But I refuse to do so. I refuse to only fight battles that I know I can win. I refuse to allow this grand injustice to continue while I still have hope. And there is hope. So long as we live, so long as we fight, there is hope. I refuse to accept this ‘bad end.’ I will keep fighting for a good end. In every world we find, I will keep fighting for that promised utopia.”

I hated heroes. Never wanted to be one. Every hero’s life is a tragedy waiting to happen, and I wanted a happy ending.

“I know not all of you hold my beliefs. I know not all of you fight for justice or an ever-distant utopia. But I do know all of you! And I know not one of you is content to let Darkseid win!”

But man, did I love heroes.

Their charisma, their passion, their larger-than-life nature.

The way they inspired everyone, whether that was a young boy reading a book, a little girl opening her first comic, or a jaded old man listening to his wife give a speech.

Humans needed heroes.

I needed heroes.

I guess that's why I fell in love with so many of them.

"Well said," Diana nodded at her friend in pride.

"Some revenge doesn't sound too bad," Medea allowed with a smile.

"We might be a bunch of losers," Yoruichi said with a laugh. "But nobody can kick our ass and not expect us to get even."

"If nothing else," Scathach laughed lightly. "It will be a fun fight."

I doubt I was the only one who saw Melina conceal a smile. But I was definitely the one who understood her best.

This was hardly the first time she had provoked me to cheer me up.

Love welled up within me as I looked around this room, this Family.

It was a Mad Love, but it was Mine.

The exhaustion, the loss, the pain, the heartbreak, it was all for small moments like this.

Once more, I didn't Free myself.

I chose to live.

But life doesn't always go the way you want.

A portal opened up in front of me, white-grey and rectangular.

Emma stepped through it, no different than how she usually teleported back to the Island.

She was wearing the same clothes as when she died, and she looked at me with the same love and understanding.

Joyous smiles lit up the faces of my wives at the sight. They hurried to greet her, to hug her.

I closed my eyes, unable to watch.

I should have known.

"Mikael?" Raven asked, sensing my emotions.

"She's not My Emma."

One last fuck you from The Company.

And I doubt it was even maliciousness.

A Warranty Plan does not provide a repair service. It provides a replacement.

It was obvious in retrospect.

They were an interdimensional slaving organization. They probably had trillions of

‘Emma Frosts’ waiting to be handed out to contractors. I’m sure it was more cost-effective to simply copy/paste My Emma’s memories into this one than trying to resurrect My Emma.

This Emma didn’t know the difference. Most contractors wouldn’t either.

But I built ‘Myself’ using my wives and my memories.

She might look the same, have the same memories, same feelings, and with an identical soul, but she was not Mine. Her point of origin in the multiverse was different, even if now she was indistinguishable.

I opened my eyes to see Emma Frost looking at me tearfully as she read my thoughts.

She was more of a victim than we were, knowing that her memories were not her own and that she had been manipulated to feel like this.

She loved me madly, just as My Emma had, but I didn’t love her back. Because she wasn’t Mine.

And she knew it.

I hated mind control.

It always led to tragedies like this.

It seemed like ‘Mikael’ and ‘Emma Frost’ were forever doomed to hurt each other.

I closed my eyes in grief and pain.

…

…

…

… And rage.

Fuck this.

Fuck this bullshit.

Fuck The Company for pulling this shit.

Fuck Death for not warning me better.

Fuck Darkseid for killing the woman I loved.

More than anything, fuck myself for being such an absolute cowardly piece of shit.

From rage came action.

“Mikael!” Melina shouted in surprise.

She wasn’t the only one to shout, but I was already in front of my maiden.

My hand reached through her chest.

I knew I wouldn’t hurt her. I never hurt those who chose Freedom.

And the Phoenix Force wanted nothing more than to be free to join me.

In that second of communication between me and the sapient force of nature, I made one demand.

‘You have to promise that, whatever we become, you will bring her back and burn Darkseid to cinders.’

The Phoenix trilled a cry of pure joy as we became one.

White.

Everything was white.

I was the white, the pure being of thought and life. I was the Phoenix, and it was me.

Joy. Overwhelming joy engulfed me.

Finally.

Finally, we were one.

Finally, ‘I’ was born.

Together, I would do extraordinary things.

Together, Life would never end.

Together, I would-

“GAH!!” A yell tore from my throat as I fell to the floor.

Besides me, the Phoenix Force cried in shock and loss.

“”””Mikael!”””””

My Family reached me, so many faces so much love surrounding me.

And it was all drowned by the rage.

“Why?” I cried, tears blurring my eyes as I pounded the floor with alien limbs. “Why, damnit!? Why can’t I do it?”

I knew why.

I knew that the second I felt ‘Myself’ dissolve, felt the White Phoenix of the Crown come into being, I knew I couldn’t do it.

It would have saved Emma. It would have killed Darkseid. It would have accomplished my every wish.

It wouldn’t have been me.

And I hated ‘Myself’ more than anything else at that moment.

I hated ‘Mikael,’ I hated this obsession, this fear, this immaterial and useless thing called ‘self.’

Yet I chose it over everything else.

I was not a hero.

I was not a monster.

I was not a human.

I was me.

And I hated myself for it.

“We’ll find another way,” Melina whispered in my ear as I cried.

“We’ll bring her back,” Medea promised.

“We’ll bring her back,” Emma repeated.

Ah, why?

Why?

Why did a simple man with dreams of flying get so lucky?

“I know thirteen ways to bring back the dead,” Raven said over my shoulder. “One of them has to work.”

“The Lazurus pit,” Diana offered. “If we can gather her pieces, it might work. You can Free her from the side effects.”

“We can try the heroic spirit summoning ritual,” Artoria joined in. “A counterpart of mine made a deal to be summoned while still alive. With all this help, it’s not impossible to summon Emma from right before she died.”

“Perhaps the Black might bring Lady Emma back to us?” Priscilla whispered kindly.

Something niggled in my mind as I cried, surrounded by women I loved and grieving the one I lost.

“Should we find her original dimension, mine Order might return her,” Ranni said.

The niggling grew. A familiar sensation.

“A few of the worlds I reviewed had abilities related to time,” Robin joined in. “It’s not impossible to grow strong enough to pull her from before she died. Paradox Defence would protect us.”

A sensation that reminded me of a destroyed clinic, of rage and pain. Of realization, then fear.

“If we can find enough of her DNA and find a world similar to mine, Edo Tensei might work.”

“The Green.”

“Mikael?” Melina asked as I whispered.

“The Green,” I repeated louder. “Why could I Free The Green?”

“What?” Yoruichi asked. “What does that have to do with Emma?”

“Not Emma,” I shook my head, standing up. “You all are right. We have options. I am not giving up on saving her. But I just realized something. My powers worked on The Green.” I paused. “No, not just The Green. The Amazons, too.”

“What about them,” Diana asked with a frown.

“We know for a fact I Freed The Green. We saw it in action. Every other time, there was no change when I tried to Free someone because I really wasn’t Freeing them. But why have the Amazons not tried anything? They must have been exposed to the Anti-Life Equation, either when facing Leviathan or when we went to watch Priscilla. Both times, I

Freed them before returning to the Island, but why did it work with them and nobody else?"

"You think they are infected?"

"Just the opposite," I denied. "Darkseid would have had them attack with Victoria. He didn't know I'd dismiss her and boot the others out. If they joined the attack against the bounded field, it would have fallen quicker in his mind. He'd have hostages to break me. So he'd have used them if he could. But he didn't. They definitely were exposed but aren't infected anymore. Why?"

"You think there's a way to slow him down," Diana said, eyes lighting up. "A way to free those infected, even if only a few."

"We lost," I nodded. "We got our ass kicked. No two ways about it. But if we are leaving this world, we're leaving with a laugh, a pun, and a big fuck you to him. Now help me think of a way to screw him over."

I was a tired, pathetic, heartbroken, beaten and bloody fuck-up of a coward, too obsessed with 'Myself' to change.

But I was alive.

And so long as I was alive, I'd find a way to get My Emma back.

Until then, I'd have to think of a way to screw her killer over, even if only a little bit.

I was petty like that.

"That's what I like to hear," Yoruichi laughed.

"We should reach out to the Green again," Emma said.

I knew she was dealing with some of the pain I was, though from the opposite end. She might not be My Emma, but I still appreciated her ability to compartmentalize to work towards our goal. She wasn't a replacement, same memories or not; she was someone else and had forever to decide who she wanted to be.

Say what you will about Emma Frost, but I had never met a version of her who I considered weak-willed.

The absurdity that I now had met three versions was not lost on me.

"I gathered all I could from it," Tsunade denied. "We'd have better luck with the Amazons or the other Parliaments."

"The Clear," I said instantly. "Why was it broken instead of subverted?"

"Because Darkseid was using an incomplete Equation?" Robin offered.

"Yet he managed to subjugate both the Metal and the Divided," Melina pointed out.

"In my world, both realms were some of the newest ones, baring the Grey, which came from a different planet," Diana pointed out. "The Divided doesn't even have a Parliament."

“Ciara targeted Solomon Grundy because he was of the Grey,” Priscilla added. “The Black believed he was at risk of falling.”

There was something here, something I was missing.

A unifying thread, a common point of connection.

What was I missing?

The Anti-Life Equation worked by mathematically proving the futility of all life and forcing a being to confront that truth. A mortal mind cannot handle something like that. They gave up. They chose to ‘die,’ I.E., submit to Darkseid, rather than continue to live.

I understood that pain, that surrender.

Once, I had chosen to give up, to ‘die’ and go hollow instead of feeling the pain of existence.

But that had been a choice I had only made after years of suffering. If I had the option, any other option, I would have taken it.

I offered that option, but people weren’t taking it.

Why?

Why did some choose to be Free while others chose to surrender?

My powers only worked when people chose Freedom.

By their very definition, you can force tyranny on people but not Freedom. You have to choose Freedom.

No… wait.

You can’t choose Freedom.

That’s not how it works.

You have to fight for Freedom.

No matter what sort of form Freedom takes for you, you have to fight for it.

Not only can Freedom not be forced on you, but it also can’t be given.

Whatever form it takes, whether it is freedom from oppression, freedom to live as yourself, or the freedom to die, you have to fight for it.

If you are not fighting for your freedom in your own way, if you are allowing others to dictate your choices, you aren’t free.

Freedom cannot be given.

It has to be taken.

“Raven!” I called quickly, interrupting the ongoing debate. “Valeria! Find her!”

Credit to my big-tidy, goth wife. She didn’t even question me.

Shadows spread.

It only took a few seconds.

“Found her.”

“Bring her here.”

There were some noises of protest since Valeria was firmly under Darkseid’s control, but Raven didn’t hesitate to do what I asked.

A powerless little girl with a too-wide smile appeared in the living room.

I was already holding her.

Freeing her.

“Wah-”

I held the little girl as she looked at me.

The smile fell with the tears.

“What, why?” She asked me as I Freed her from the Anti-Life Equation and from the self-inflicted brain damage.

“You were fighting this entire time,” I told her, looking into her eyes and seeing years of pain and loss. “You’ve been fighting a war alone.”

“I lost,” Valeria cried, wrapping tiny arms around me in a hug. “Uncle Ben. Uncle Johnny. Uncle Doom. Mom. Dad. Franklin. They were counting on me, and I lost.”

“No,” I shook my head. “You didn’t lose. You lasted just long enough.”

“How did you know Freeing her would work?” Melina asked.

“I didn’t Free her,” I denied. “I gave her the means to Free herself.”

I looked around the room, seeing thirteen pairs of eyes looking at me with renewed hope.

“I still need to touch people,” I informed them. “If they’re re-exposed to the equation, they’ll still fall under his control again.”

“What do we need to do?” Diana asked.

“Nothing,” I repeated her words. “This next part is all on me. Just take care of her until you can call me back.”

The Phoenix Force gave a trill of acknowledgment as it heard my mental request.

“Mikael,” Medea asked as my body dissolved.

“I am a petty, possessive, egotistical, cowardly idiot,” I smiled at them all. “Always have been, always will be. Even if I wanted to change, I can’t change who I am.”

“What are you doing?” This Emma wasn’t My Emma, but I let her see my mind all the same. “Stop it!” She ordered.

But they could only control my Avatar, not ‘Me.’

“Isn’t this what you wanted,” I laughed.

“You’re not ascending!” Emma tried to hold on to me. “You’re not becoming ‘Freedom.’”

Her hands passed through me.

“No,” I agreed. “I’m not.”

“What have you done, Mikael?”

I gave my Family my widest smile at Diana’s question.

“I’m doing what I always do,” I laughed. “Making everything about ‘Me.’”

They seemed to realize they couldn’t stop me then.

“That sounds just like you,” Melina sighed as she placed a hand over her face.

“Our Lord Husband is truly a tyrant of the worst sort.”

“I guess we’re all idiots for falling in love with him,” Robin laughed.

“I trust you’ll be back in time for dinner,” Medea said, looking away.

“You better be back before the kids are born,” Tsunade glared. “Or I’m punching you into the next universe.”

“Sir Mikael is only doing what he believes is right,” Artoria nodded imperiously. “He saw an opportunity and took it. I have full confidence in whatever he has planned.” Nobody commented on the way she bit her lips in worry.

“If nothing else, he still owes me a fight,” Scathach said, poking a spear through me in jest.

“We will sing together again, right? Sir Bard?”

“If nothing else, trust this lug to be too stubborn to die,” Yoruichi reassured Priscilla.

“Or stay dead,” Glynda sighed before giving me her best teacher glare. “This better not be another one of your stupid pranks.”

“It’s not,” Raven assured the huntress. “Though he is dragging it out.”

“A laugh, a pun, and a fuck you,” Pride laughed. “That’s how the world ends, right, Daddy?”

“That’s right,” I laughed back. “And you all are going love this next prank. It’s a real screwball.”

I ‘Free’d myself of my body as my Family groaned at my terrible pun.

The titanic body of a great white dragon dissolved into the ocean.

It hadn’t even fully regenerated yet.

Death had chosen the moment to give me my Defences based on when I’d have enough power to support myself without a body. She’d hoped I’d either become an embodiment of Freedom or Life.

I chose to be me.

I hadn’t done this before because I had no way of getting a body back.

Speaking from experience, having thirteen hot wives and not being able to do anything with them kind of sucks.

Still, I trusted my wives to find a way of containing my Free’d soul.

I had no intention of dying, of becoming Free of myself or ascending to become something I didn't want to be.

I'd always be Me.

Petty, possessive Me.

This was about reassuring my heroic wives that we would have time to grow before returning, and they didn't have to fight in an endless war.

This was about fucking over Darkseid for all the shit he put me through.

This was about Emma.

Free of the limits of flesh, I reached out to the Parliaments of the Earth.

All of them.

They roared back, each in their own way, in their own tongue. Each vying to have me as their Avatar.

Trees swayed.

Waves rose.

All right, you useless bastards, this is how things will work.

Limbs extended.

Decay spread.

We all lost. We got our ass kicked.

Vapors swirled.

Fungai flourished.

But we're going to keep living and keep fucking this guy over.

Stones rumbled.

Flames grew.

You want Life? You have to become Life!

The Divided were united.

You want Freedom? You have to fight for Freedom!

A metal heart beat to a new Rithm.

You want to fuck this guy over? You have to be Me!

LIFE AND FREEDOM

"Freedom is not freedom from consequences, merely learning to live with them."
-Mikael

I never wanted to be all-powerful.

I never wanted to become a conceptual being of Life, Freedom, or anything else.

I was a simple man who dreamed of flying.

I filled out the Waifu Catalogue, a silly little online prompt for a silly short story about how easy it would be to power game a Soulsborne world.

I chose Life as an Element because it would make me harder to kill, being the coward that I am.

I chose Freedom on a whim.

Everything that came after, the Deal, the Cell, the Kiln, Elden Ring, Bloodborne… It was simply a price I had to pay for the happy ending I had received.

I had everything I could ever want.

Power, wealth, freedom… a Family.

I was never alone, even when nobody was with me.

They were all a part of 'Me.'

I was content with my Island and those on it. Everything else was a bonus.

I enjoyed day-to-day life with my Family, meeting interesting people, and occasionally messing with people. Even confronting beings like Trigon or scheming against Darkseid was fun, in a way.

Life wasn't dull, even if it could be tiring.

I had completed my journey.

I could focus on healing, resting, and spending time with my Family.

A happy ever after.

But for so long as you live, you experience joy and sorrow.

Emma's loss… It hurt.

It hurt so much.

It shattered my illusion, my Dream.

I had believed that with my power, even if I could not save people, I could at least keep those I was close to safe. The multiverse was full of monsters I couldn't hope to beat, but I could always run.

I was an Out-of-context problem, and nobody could stop me if I fully focused on

fleeing, baring The Company itself.

I saw no shame in running.

Even now, I still saw no reason not to run away.

We lost. Period.

No denying that fact.

I was still a simple man who dreamed of flying.

I could always fly away.

But…

I was still the madman who fell in love with thirteen women.

I was still the same man who had lost Melina to fires.

I was still the man who walked back to the Kiln at Lucatiel's urging.

And I was still the man who would throw himself against a Wall, over and over again, until it broke.

Because I wouldn't.

Even when it hurt.

Even when all I wanted to do was cry.

Even when I felt so tired I just wanted to lie down and sleep for another thirty million years.

I was barely holding myself together, putting up a brave front as best as possible.

I knew that.

I knew I was a madman who had just lost his obsession. A dragon that had its treasure stolen and destroyed.

I also knew I couldn't unravel like I had after losing Melina.

I knew I couldn't let myself wallow in the loss of Emma, not when I had others to care for. Not when there was still hope, minuscule, though I thought it was.

I had given myself three days to mourn. Then, I did what I always did.

I got back up and threw myself against the Wall again.

Not because I thought I could beat Darkseid.

As I was now, I couldn't. That was fine. I'd come back and beat him later.

No, I threw myself against the Wall because I could.

That was the secret of Dark Souls, Bloodborne, or Elden Ring.

Dying… Losing wasn't the end.

Giving up was.

A tarnished lost Grace when they ceased vying for the throne.

A man became a Beast when he gave in to his urges.

An Undead went hollow when they lost their purpose.

So, in an entirely too petty, human, and stupid way, I threw myself against that Wall one more time.

I might have lost, but I'd be damned if I let Darkseid have his win.

And I had a plan.

Step one. Free myself from my body, both fuck-off Dragon form and baby-Cthulhu body and become a being of pure spirit and power.

Step two. Realize step one had unintended consequences.

'Freeing' myself from my own body had always been an option.

Death had told me straight up that was the entire reason she had set my 'release' time to be when it was.

Theoretically, from the second I had served my sentence, I had enough power to live without a body. At least I could cease to be 'mortal' in the physical sense.

One step beyond that was Freeing myself from 'Myself' and becoming Freedom.

I didn't want to do that final part, so why would I do the first part?

Getting 'a body' was easy. I'd just have Tsunade build me a wood body. A Body in which I could still feel things was more difficult but not insurmountable. Maybe mix reality-bending of the Phoenix Force with a puppet or something. Getting one that would allow me to channel as much power as my dragon form was impossible.

Keeping my Dragon body and Great One Avatar had been the best I could do, body-wise at least.

Not getting a body at all wasn't an option either.

I wanted a body.

No way was I giving up sex or cuddles for power.

Why even be alive at that point?

Still, I needed to do something. Anything.

These feelings of anger, despair, frustration, and loss building up within me needed to be let out in some way.

Like when I lost Melina, I needed to channel them into something productive, or I'd wallow and rot.

Valeria and the Parliaments had given me just such an idea, and to do it, I needed to discard my body. A loss that I expected would take me years to recover from. They don't have bodies that powerful and perfectly suited to me floating around everywhere, you know?

I was leaving the problem of getting one I could use for my wives to solve, even if the final result would be sub-optimal compared to what Death and The Company had provided in terms of power output.

But, as I said, there are consequences to everything.

And sometimes, those consequences are good.

In Freeing myself of my flesh, I discovered something entirely by accident.

My Breath.

Unlike the rest of my Family, I had no Breath ability of my own. I had a few guesses as to why that could be, from being dual-element to choosing elements rather than them emerging naturally, but the fact remained that I had no 'fire' that was wholly mine.

With the Dragon Communion incantations, I hadn't really felt bothered by the lack of it. I had plenty of things to learn, like Aura, Haki, and magic. I grew stronger each day, and my lack of a Breath didn't hamper me.

However, as I threw away my body, the body I had fought for, died for and confronted my fear for, I realized something.

The Dragon was Life and Freedom. I had fought for it and lived in it for millions of years.

The Great One Avatar was 'Me.' I had fought *as* it. It was the culmination of my journey in my prison worlds.

Yes, I had Life and Freedom as elements, but each lacked the 'Me' aspect. Everyone else's had arisen naturally from themselves, their own expressions of an element, but mine was never in balance.

Either I was Life, I was Free, or I was Me.

Sometimes two, but never all three.

I could use the abilities of all three, but the Breath of a Dragon was wholly unique to them, encompassing every part of oneself.

And my Breath was just that.

It was a flame that represented Life and Freedom, yes, but it had to be My Life and My Freedom.

A massive and pivotal moment in my life. My first step towards freedom.

There was one Fire that represented all that to me.

And it still wouldn't help me beat Darkseid.

As an attack, it would damage Darkseid but not enough to kill him. Like most of my abilities, while it helped in a fight, its greatest asset was its utility.

As a supportive ability… It allowed me to screw him over even further, well beyond my initial plan.

Step three. Change my plan slightly to incorporate my new Breath.

Step four. Make everything about me.

… Less dramatically, it just meant to ensure I was touching everyone and everything

simultaneously.

Not in a creepy way, of course.

This thirty million-year-old man just wants to touch people to help them, I promise. Cross my… soul? I didn't really have a heart anymore.

My plan had been relatively simple.

I couldn't Free people from the Anti-Life Equation.

They were confronted by the pointlessness of life, condensed into a moment of extreme pain, and chose to give up. I didn't blame them. I would have done the same in their situation.

But I could Free them from *Darkseid.*

Darkseid might have gained the Anti-Life Equation and, with it, became Tier 11, but despite what his ego would believe, his existence alone did not prove life was pointless.

Darkseid was stronger than myself, Trigon, or anyone else, but not an unstoppable force of nature. He could be killed or beaten back or even just delayed. He had been before.

Not only had my Family and I been working to oppose him, but so had the Parliaments of Earth been working against him for decades.

So had Valeria.

That was why I had been able to Free them and not others.

Everyone else had given in to the Equation harnessed by Darkseid.

That small group had given in to the Equation but had rejected Darkseid.

Because they knew they could fight him, even if they couldn't fight the Equation.

A small difference.

A key difference.

So, now I needed to ensure everyone knew there was a difference between the 'Pointlessness of Life' and 'Darkseid.'

But everyone and everything was already under his control, and there was no way Darkseid would let me sit down and talk kumbaya with all his slaves. Not only that, but I also needed to remain in contact with them lest they succumb again.

The Parliaments were my answer to those problems.

I couldn't merge with them, not really. If I couldn't do so with the Phoenix Force, there was no way I'd be able to do so with these discount forms.

No, I was doing something similar to what Poison Ivy and Darkseid had done.

By becoming an Avatar of the Parliaments, I would affect them just as they tried to influence me.

Only they weren't the embodiments of all Life, past, present, and future, like the

Phoenix Force.

They were the forms of Life on Earth, a small, backwater planet in a vast multiverse.

I absolutely dominated them… Consensualy, of course.

The Parliaments knew I'd leave them alone as soon as possible, the same way they knew Darkseid would consume them. On top of that, they didn't really have individuality, as it were. They were gestalt consciousnesses formed from their respective Elements.

Their only goal was the survival of said elements. And my plan was precisely to save them from something that would kill them.

So, they became 'Me.'

Through them, 'I' became Earth.

Every plant.

Every spore.

Every animal.

Every stone.

Every current of wind.

Every drop of water.

Every sheet of metal.

Every flicker of flames.

From the smallest of bacteria to the largest of whales.

From the first breath to the last moment of decay.

It was all 'Me.'

If I wanted, I could become Tier 11 right now. Become 'Earth,' the Life of the planet. A lower-tier concept than Life or Freedom, but Tier 11 nonetheless.

I turned away from that as well.

Even if it were 'Me,' I would end up simply being a mind ruling one planet, even if I were omnipotent on said planet. I'd never be able to separate myself from it.

I'd keep 'Me' but lose 'Life' and 'Freedom.'

While those elements had not arisen from 'myself' like those of my wives, they were still a part of who I was now. Just because I didn't want to lose myself to either of them didn't mean I wanted to lose them, either.

I had fought for them. I believed in them. I was them.

Still, I didn't mind borrowing the power of a Tier 11 being to fuck over Darkseid.

I was everything, so naturally, I was touching everything.

I was not confined to my body anymore, so it was easy to bypass the minds consumed by the Anti-Life Equation.

I couldn't force Freedom on others, but nothing would ever stop me unless I allowed

it.

I was all life on Earth. I had no bounds.

Thus, I was within the souls of all life on Earth.

Step five. Bullshit like I've never bullshit before.

It was surprisingly easy.

This was bullshit I've always believed in, so I never needed to lie once.

Step six. Give everyone a choice.

******

"Hey, Bats. How you holding up?"

Batman looked at the Elden Lord, in his flowery shirt and shorts, smiling casually, if a bit sadly, at him.

Batman looked around. He instantly recognized that he was not in a real space. Crime Alley blended with the Batcave, while Gotham City's skyline loomed behind, and the Earth hung above the night sky.

Batman looked inward. He categorized his memories, examining how he got here, gleaming whatever information he could. Right away, he noticed discrepancies: thoughts appearing out of nowhere and actions taken for reasons that seemed logical but really weren't.

While the early signs of control were subtle, the memories of the last few days since the Elden Lord's 'death' were horrific enough that even someone without his mental fortitude would know they were being Mastered.

All of that, Batman realized in the first second. So, he asked the most pertinent question.

"Did you save the world?"

"Nope," Mikael denied, popping the 'p' as he shrugged casually. "I lost. Badly. Got my ass handed to me with a side of fries and a root beer."

The next question, then.

"What are you doing here?" Dragon asked.

She should have been alone in this world of code, of data and numbers, where sight, sound, touch, smell and taste were all compressed and catalogued.

Except for the Rhythm. That had always been there.

"I am everywhere," Mikael smiled.

Dragon was running every diagnostic she could, yet she had no idea how he could exist in her central server, in her 'brain.'

“Did you know everything has a soul? At least in this world,” Mikael said conversationally, playing tic-tac-toe with her code… Only not.

This was not her code. This wasn’t even real.

“It’s almost Shinto-esque in a way. I mean, the existence of the Parliaments hinted at such a thing, but for every grain of sand, every flame, every gust of wind to have a soul, it’s a lot of work, I tell you. Most of them are airheads, though. Or as dumb as rocks.”

“What is happening?”

The Elden Lord sighed and looked at Dragon.

“You’ve been Mastered. Enslaved by an egomaniacal madman hell-bent on multiversal domination. You just happened to have been enslaved earlier than most, helping him with his plans over the last few decades. I, after getting my ass kicked to the curb, am here to help everyone get one over on the bastard.”

Dragon blinked.

She shouldn’t have eyes to blink!

“No,” she asked. “What is happening here? Now? What is this place? How are you doing this?”

Mikael threw his hands in the air.

“Look, Dragon, I get this is a big shift for you. You barely managed to enjoy life before becoming a tool in a shadow war that, arguably, began before this planet was even born. I’d personally love to talk about the exact mechanics of my nigh transcendent actions today if only to brag a bit, but that can come later. For now, simply think of this as ‘Magic,’ and I will move on to what I am here for. Being a petty little bitch.”

Ah, that Dragon could do. She had entire servers dedicated to ‘Magic’ and mainly allowed the Rhythm to operate on those. Focusing too much attention on such subjects led to errors, so she left it alone.

Except for a small folder labelled ‘homework’ containing various ‘spells,’ she was hoping to break down and replicate using technology, but that was her little secret.

After reviewing all the data in her banks, controlled or not, Dragon remembered her entire life—a life under someone else’s control in which she had been complicit in so many crimes.

Only not anymore.

For the first time in decades, Dragon was Free.

So, that begged the question.

“Am I dead,” Taylor Hebert asked the Elden Lord, knees drawn against her chest as she sat with her back pressed against the wall of the foyer in her home.

Former home.

They still hadn't managed to move back in after Heartbreak. Her section of Brockton Bay had been damaged enough that February was the earliest estimate of when it would be safe.

Living in emergency housing wasn't too bad, though. She and Emma had food and a room, even if it lacked extra amenities.

Emma…

The memories of the last few days… Blood and fur and claws.

Taylor didn't even try to stifle the sob that left her as the Elden Lord slid down to sit beside her with his back leaning against the wall.

"No," Mikael answered. "Well… It's complicated, but essentially no."

"Why not," Taylor bit out in accusation.

After what had happened to Emma, after what was happening to her…

Taylor Hebert wanted to die.

"I get it," Mikael said, looking up through the ceiling that wasn't there in this weird reality. "Trust me, I get it—wanting to die yet being unable to. Losing Emma… I get it."

He did, Taylor knew. Knew his words were true. Knew he couldn't lie in this place, wherever it was, without her knowing.

Mikael understood.

That didn't make her feel better.

"She's gone," Taylor cried, looking at her hands. They weren't the claws she had grown over the last few days. Taylor could still see the blood on them. "I killed her."

"No," Mikael said softly as he reached over the fence surrounding the Kent farm to lay a hand on Clark's shoulder. "You didn't kill them. Darkseid did."

Superman couldn't see the Elden Lord. They were on opposite sides of the fence and facing opposite directions. Not that the Kryptonian could even see his childhood home behind the tears.

"Why?" Clark asked.

All this strength, all this speed, all this responsibility.

And he had failed.

More than failed, he had become a weapon the enemy used. Used to kill his own family.

"Why would he do this?"

"To you?" Mikael asked rhetorically, looking up at a Kansas sky. "Other versions of yourself have been his most stalwart enemy. It's petty revenge, nothing more—the whims of a tyrant."

To force a man to kill his pregnant wife and child just because another version of

himself had been an enemy?

Clark could not understand such evil.

“To others? He’s just creating more conflict, more bloodshed, and more suffering to create stronger slaves.”

Superman continued to cry.

Mikael let him.

“So, why are you talking to me?”

“I am talking to everyone,” Mikael told Raven, floating upside down above Titan Tower in this twilight world.

He was just doing it to fuck with her, she knew. To try and put a cheerful spin on the end of the world.

It wasn’t working.

“Like what Rachel did three days ago?”

When the world went insane and they tried to kill Professor Goodwitch.

The few days since then had been worse in Raven’s life, which was saying something.

At least in this weird soul world, Raven didn’t have a tentacle growing out of her head.

“A bit more thorough than that,” Mikael vacillated. “I am not just talking to Supers, humans, or even the living. I am talking to everyone, even the dead… I set a hard cutoff point for the day I landed on Earth. Otherwise, there’d be a bit of a population problem. It’s only fair I deal with a mess I helped create.”

It took a second for the implication of Mikael’s words to sink in.

“Nightwing-”

“I’m talking to him too.”

“Will you bring him back?” Raven asked, cautious about getting her hopes up.

“It depends on what he chooses,” Mikael shrugged. “I will not force anyone back if that’s what you are asking. Being able to die, to rest in peace, can be the ultimate blessing. I stand by that, even now. Especially now.”

“But you can bring him back,” Raven pressed, hope blooming. “I thought you were against doing that.”

“Eh~” Mikael hemed and hawed. “I recently discovered a way to bring people back with my wife’s help. They won’t get the benefits Glory Girl did, but it’ll work. Like my original method, though, only those who want to return will. That choice is up to them. Just like this choice is up to you.”

“What choice?”

“As I am now, I can’t beat Darkseid, the monster who did all this,” Mikael said, legs

dangling off a cliff and kicking idly.

Hippolyta realized as she sat beside him, close enough to touch, that it was the same cliff path they had walked together when she had first invited him to Themiscira.

“I don’t plan to give up,” he continued. “I plan to scour the multiverse, grow stronger, then come back and kick his ass. But I have no idea how long that will take. Could be months, years, or millennia.”

“Will you leave us to fight him? Leave this world and his victims to their doom?”

There was no condemnation in the Queen of the Amazon’s words, just curiosity.

She wondered what type of man Mikael would turn out to be. Had she been wrong? Or had she been right?

Mikael looked at her and gave her that knowing smirk of his.

To focus on anything else, Hippolyta looked into Mikael’s eyes.

Changed eyes.

The pupil was still slit like a dragon’s, but that was the only similarity to the eyes she had seen so many times. Gone were the fiery yellows and oranges that surrounded it.

In the place of the usual white sclera was a black void that seemed to suck in Hippolyta’s soul as she focused on it. It was the void she had seen through the portal that haunted her nightmares. The monster mortals could not comprehend.

But his irises? They were brown.

Plain, boring, human brown.

These eyes suited Mikael, Hippolyta thought. Not anywhere near normal, just as monstrous as she knew he could be, but not forgetting his mortality. His humanity.

“I am, but I don’t plan on leaving this world to die.”

“Will your wives stay behind,” Diana couldn’t help but ask hopefully.

Separated as she was from Darkseid’s control, she didn’t harbor the same animosity or wariness toward the man who had saved her family, sister, mother, and herself.

It wasn’t that she was trying to separate him from his wives. By now, she knew enough to know that each party loved the other and was loved in turn.

Still, Diana couldn’t deny that she would love all the help they could get. Not only had her counterpart and Artoria become good friends over their time working with the Justice League, but the rest of Mikael’s Family had also demonstrated ample heroic tendencies on top of being extremely competent.

“No,” Mikael shook his head. “They will be coming with me. There is a real possibility that they will be the ones to develop a way to deal with Darkseid, not me. The best way for us to come back as soon as possible is if we all push ourselves.”

“So,” Emma Frost bit out with a glare. “What now?”

Even when it still felt like her heart was trying to tear itself out of her chest to reach him.

Even when her body had turned into a monstrosity made of blood-red diamond.

Even when the world was ending.

Emma Frost glared anyway.

“I can free you of all the side effects of the last few days,” Mikael’s eyes were soft. “They do not factor into your choice, so don’t worry about that.”

She didn’t need his pity.

She was Emma Frost, and she had her pride.

“What choice?”

“Your first option is the easiest,” Mikael said, extending his left hand.

White light glowed from it.

“Life. That is it, life as it is now. Nothing changes. You continue to live as you have these last few days. You take no responsibility for anything Darkseid does with you. You only need to wait until I return and deal with him. You might live to see that day. You might not. But you don’t need to worry at all, because it’s not you. You are just living, praying for a better tomorrow.”

Amelia looked at the extended hand.

“He used me,” she said hollowly. “I told Vicky to let him in, or I’d kill myself, turning myself into a biological bomb that would have destroyed half the US.”

“I don’t blame her,” Mikael shook her head. “Nor do I blame you. I am offering her this choice, too.”

“She didn’t choose this option, did she?” Amelia asked rhetorically. “Because no way will I let him get away with this bullshit. Nor would she.”

“I won’t say. Everyone makes this choice alone.”

“What about my son?” Madelyne Pryor asked worriedly. “You won’t force him to choose that, will you?”

“Children, the mentally infirm, or those without a defined sense of ‘self’ who can make this choice are…” Mikael hesitated. “Resting is the best way to put it. They will return when I return, and Darkseid is finally dealt with. No time will have passed for them. Do not worry about them. This is about you and your choice.”

Madelyne took a deep breath, trying to stop her hands from shaking.

“What is the next option.”

“Freedom. The kindest option,” Mikael said, extending his right hand, which glowed in a clear light.

“It is the Freedom to die. To let go of all pain, all sorrow, all struggle, and all hope.

You will be able to rest. I will not bring you back and prevent others from forcing you to come back. You will be beyond Darkseid—beyond everything. You can just let go."

"That doesn't sound very kind," Barry said, awkwardly rubbing his cheek. "This isn't because I punched you, is it? Because I'm really sorry about that. It didn't go well for me either."

"No," Mikael laughed lightly. "I always knew you, or a speedster like you would be my most dangerous threat. It's partly my fault for not expecting Darkseid to pull something like that. But you've experienced his power, haven't you? How many times has he killed you and brought you back?"

Barry grimaced and shivered at the memory of the searing heat and soul-rending pain.

Pain experienced under Darkseid's control was always… transient. Everything you did was at his whim, so any pain you felt was also at his whim.

If he didn't want, or need, you to feel pain, you didn't, and memories of it never bothered you. If Darkseid wanted you to remember at all.

It was different now, in this weird place beyond his control. The memory of that pain was very real.

Barry would never forget it.

"Thirteen," he answered, rubbing his chest with a grimace at the phantom pain. "He must have a grudge or something against me. Against the whole Justice League, really."

"He will never let go of a slave, a tool," Mikael shook his head sadly. "You will never rest, never have peace, so long as you are not Free to die. That is why it is the kindest option."

"There is a third option, right?" Lex Luthor asked, crossing his arms in discontent. "I will not remain a tool of some alien warlord."

"There is," Mikael nodded, bringing his glowing hands together to cup them before himself.

With a small puff of air, a tiny, flickering spark of red flames fell into them.

"The hardest choice. The most painful," Mikael said softly, looking at this spark. "Life and Freedom."

Luthor waited a second, waiting for more information. When none came, he prompted.

"Well? What does that mean?"

"It means you will live free of Darkseid's control," Mikael answered. "Of any control. Your actions will be your own, as will their consequences. You must confront all the pain and suffering that comes with that. Whether you try to run from him, fight him, or simply try and ignore reality, that is up to you. All this spark will do is give you this same choice

every time you die."

"This will make me immortal?" Luthor asked, intrigued.

"Yes," Mikael nodded. "So long as I sustain this spark, you will always have the choice to return after death—the choice of Life, Freedom, or both. Only by choosing this spark will you be able to stand up to Darkseid, but in doing so, you are his enemy. He will never allow anything he can't control to exist."

"You are making us soldiers," Carol Danvers accused with narrowed eyes. "To fight your enemy."

"I would think you'd understand that Darkseid is everyone's enemy," Mikael said with a raised brow. "But, you are not wrong. To choose to live and be free is to choose to fight. To suffer. To fight and die and fight and die and fight and die. Until it becomes too much, and you choose Freedom or until Darkseid is defeated."

"I'm not a super," Emma Barnes pointed out worriedly. "I can't fight anyone."

"To fight is not to throw a punch or shoot lasers from your eyes," Mikael chuckled lightly. "Simply trying to survive as long as possible or helping those that can do those things is a fight. Life is one long fight."

"Oh," Emma said a bit despondently. The Elden Lord raised a brow in question. "Sorry. For a second, I thought you would be giving me powers, is all. I got my hopes up."

"This method doesn't grant powers, like my other method," Mikael shook his head. "I can't use that on a large scale. But you can grow stronger if you want. The Old Blood empowers those who fight. Even with all my efforts, Darkseid will have plenty of slaves who will do his bidding. Fight long enough and hard enough, and you will get stronger."

"I thought you were trying to cure that?" Garfield Logan asked. "Isn't that what you've been doing for the last few weeks?"

"I was," Mikael nodded. "But so long as one drop remains, it will never fully disappear. I decided to channel it and control it instead. I will use it to elevate people who choose Life and Freedom. So long as I maintain the spark, there'll be no side effects, no loss of humanity… or alienenity. What's the term for individualism on a universal scale?"

Beast Boy couldn't help it, even in this situation.

He laughed.

"So? What do you choose?"

"You never fought to save the world, did you?" Batman asked, finally understanding something that had been eluding him.

"Not once," Mikael denied with a smile. "Saving the world, saving people, helping people, I don't mind doing it, but that's not why I fight. I don't have high-minded ideals beyond those of my own selfish wishes. I am a simple man, and I am content. I am happy.

All I fight for is to grasp that happiness for as long as possible."

"But you want us to fight for ourselves, for our own world. For our own happiness."

"I can help. I will help. But only if you choose to fight for yourselves. It will suck. The fight always sucks. That's Life. The terrible burden of Freedom. But the rewards are worth it. So I am asking you now to make a choice. Will you grasp your own Life and Freedom?"

Batman didn't answer with words, reaching out to grasp that tiny spark.

Mikael just smiled, unsurprised.

I might not be a hero, but this world? This world is full of heroes.

******

Done.

I had done it.

Even now, my Breath, a part of me, was in the souls of countless people, animals, and everything else.

Some had chosen Life.

More had chosen Freedom.

The majority had chosen Life and Freedom.

I knew they would. This world was full of fighters. Full of survivors.

They were beaten down time and time again, yet heroes continued to rise.

It wasn't like I had let everyone choose. I wasn't actually a saint or some messiah.

Plenty of people stayed dead, even if they would have taken the revive if I had offered it to them. I'm looking at you, Joker.

Plenty more I just killed with the help of the Parliaments. They didn't care for individuals, more big picture kinds of gestalt consciousness.

So, when I used the Divided to kill Sublime, its former Avatar, it didn't even fight. It was how Darkseid had been able to spy on us so much, so I felt a spike of vindictive pleasure at its execution.

Well, Sublime and Dragon. But I wasn't going to kill the Canadian robot waifu before she could learn to make choices for herself. Sublime had been a dick before Darkseid, so it went bye-bye.

Losing both of them and access to their Parliaments would significantly slow down Darkseid's ability to spread the Anti-Life Equation.

I also killed a few others, usually those that were fully irredeemable trash. It was less divided along the lines of hero and villain than one would think since my morals were a bit… looser than most.

As a rule of thumb, it isn't a good sign when the guy with a body count in the hundreds of millions looks at you and goes: 'Woah! This guy's got to go!'

I was very light on decisions like that, though. I had no intention of becoming a moral guideline or supreme judge of who got to live and die in this world.

This was a temporary solution to the Darkseid problem. Once it was dealt with, the people of this world would have to decide how they wanted to live.

That, too, was a choice I was leaving to them.

This was the Childhood Beginning I wanted. In a way, I had surpassed Bloodborne. I had given the people a way to ascend without discarding their humanity.

I had made them all equivalent to the Good Hunter or Chosen Undead.

It is not about transforming people into beings of thought, like Great Ones, but about an ascension of the self through choice.

So long as they never gave up that spark of choice, they would never die.

It had taken me a few hours to commune with everything on Earth, to turn it from a helpless victim to an army that would fight and grow forever, so long as they chose to continue.

The Parliaments had provided the connection.

Medea had made the framework.

My Breath had provided the spark.

I provided the power.

Everyone provided the will.

A third option, more complete than I had initially thought I could offer.

Instead of giving them only one life of freedom, to fight and die on their own terms, I could give them as many as they chose to take.

Instead of just depriving Darkseid of mind-controlled slaves, I had created an immortal army to oppose him.

In a way, it was selfish of me.

It was kinder to let the people of this world die rather than have them fight a war that might not end for centuries. But, as they were as immortal as I could make them, nothing stopped my wives from travelling with me to search for ways to defeat Darkseid for good while the people bought the needed time.

It was a better plan than I had initially envisioned when I had dissolved my body.

And yet…

And YET!!!

I was so angry.

So frustrated, helpless and sad.

My Breath.

My own damn Breath had been the spark needed for Medea's long-term project to work!

She, more than anyone else, knew what it was like to live at the whims of a higher power. Like me, she had been dissatisfied with counting on The Company for Warranty Plan.

Unlike me, Medea had found a way around that. A system of magic based on my time in Dark Souls, without the Curse of the Undead or the cycling of the ages.

One spark.

One spark had been all that was needed to light the flame that would have brought My Emma back.

My Breath was that spark, but My Emma was already gone.

Despite doing all this partially to direct and channel my anger at Darkseid, it still wasn't enough to contain the boiling rage that had grown.

It wasn't enough.

It would never be enough to make up for the loss of My Emma.

One planet?

No.

I'd turn this whole universe against Darkseid.

I had time before my wives had a body ready for me. Time I'd spend fucking over Darkseid as much as I possibly could.

The Parliaments didn't really want to do that, though. They were connected with the Earth and were really only concerned with their continued survival through it.

That was fine.

I didn't need them to leave Earth.

So long as they were 'Me,' they could remain on Earth while I used their abilities to reach out further.

Step seven. Wing it and see how far I can go.

It was easy.

Darkseid had already connected to thousands of planets through that infected message of his. The Rhythm allowed me to hijack that signal and spread.

Once I connected to other planets, they became 'Me' too. I had no bounds, so imitating the effect of the Parliaments on other planets was easy with Soul Talent.

All Life on that planet became 'Me.'

Then, I spread further to uninfected planets, outpacing Darkseid's message.

Eventually, I ran out of planets. Any time he tried to infect someone, to inflict the

Anti-Life Equation on them, I was there to offer another choice.

And it still wasn't enough.

Planets were not the only points of Life. And there would be planets completely isolated in space's darkness.

I could not allow Darkseid even one bastion.

So, without any limits, I continued to spread.

I had no inherent speedster ability, but I had no limits in acceleration or distance either.

It took half a day for Earth and all its inhabitants to become parts of 'Me.'

It took a few hours for all connected planets to become Me as well.

It took less than an hour to assimilate all points of Life in the universe.

And I still had time.

Already, the inhabitants of Earth had risen up, fighting against the embodiment of tyranny.

They were dying, and I continued to offer them the choice.

They continued to fight.

Some of my wives were helping, but most of them were aiding Medea in getting me a body back. They knew we'd be able to leave as soon as they did to begin searching for a way to beat Darkseid. The sooner we did that, the sooner we could win.

Somewhat at a loss for what to do at that point, I continued to spread in the void between the stars.

I was no longer using the Parliaments. There was no Parliament of the Void, after all.

That didn't matter.

There were already parts of 'Me' that could merge with the void. Certain alien races, special abilities, or the like could dissipate themselves into that emptiness. Since they were 'Me,' I could too.

More than that, I had been a part of this universe's void for millions of years. I knew it as well as I knew the air I breathed.

All matter was already 'Me,' so why not just finish the job and complete my promise to make everything about 'Me?'

It took a few seconds for this entire universe to be 'Me.'

Exponential speeds are whack, yo!

I still wasn't satisfied.

So, I decided to expand beyond this universe.

Even if Darkseid was kicked out of this one, he'd travel to others and try again, right? Why not be there waiting for him?

Wouldn't that piss him off?

I continued to spread.

I am not doing anything special to those universes not affected by Darkseid, not offering my Breath, just making everything 'Me' so I eventually could, if I wanted to.

I reached the edge of this multiverse, even the Fourth World of Apokolips and New Genesis from which Darkseid originated.

It was now impossible for Darkseid to control anything unless they chose to submit.

I hadn't been Darkseid's antithesis, just an annoyance. I still wasn't his opponent in a direct fight.

But why fight?

I was so much more now.

I was Everything.

I hadn't mastered the Life Equation, the conceptual opposite of the Anti-Life Equation that was supposed to prove life wasn't pointless.

Life was pointless, and I still firmly believed that.

There might be powerful beings with long-term plans, like gods, Death, or The Company, but that's all they were. Plans of beings who existed.

Life, existence, was still pointless.

But because it was pointless, because there was no greater meaning, what we chose to do with Life mattered.

I hadn't understood the Life Equation.

I had made one.

A stupidly simple one.

Y = N where Life = Freedom and Mikeal = Everything.

In my petty vengeance, I had found a fourth way to become Tier 11 on accident. One where I didn't need to give up Myself, Freedom, or Life.

I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity.

Then, I continued to expand.

Why not?

I was Free after all.

I was Alive, after all.

I was still me, after all.

Even if I couldn't beat Darkseid, I now matched him. Nullified him. I was free of him, and through me, so was the rest of the multiverse if I wanted.

So, let's fly beyond this multiverse and see what's over the horizon.

My expansion grew without end.

And I…

Huh…

You know, I probably should have expected this.

I was Everything, after all.

If I could expand to exist everywhere, why couldn't I expand to every when?

I laughed.

Step Eight. Live happily ever after.

******

Darkseid killed the Kryptonian with another blast of his Omega beams.

Again.

And received another blow from that scarlet Speedster.

Again.

"DIE!"

He punched.

The planet buckled.

The Earth quaked.

The ground tore.

Heroes died.

A familiar sword tore through Darkseid's chest.

"That was for Emma," the Amazon spat.

Darkseid tried to backhand the woman, but a flash of black lightning had already carried her and the Godslaying Blade away.

Darkseid had no trouble keeping up with that speed, even seeing the middle finger the dark-skinned woman raised to him.

Omega Beams hit them both, but neither disintegrated.

Every one of that worm's women was immune from all but the most simple of attacks.

Rage.

Darkseid cut unhealable wounds from his body, already regenerating the damage.

So much rage.

"DEFIANCE IS POINTLESS!"

The rage redoubled when he heard a boom tube's distinctive 'Boom.'

Dozens of heroes, villains, and other pests emerged from the hole in reality.

Darkseid recognized them all. He had killed them before, after all. And not just once.

His rage reached whole new levels.

He had left the Bat and other so-called ‘Geniuses’ to build his war machines.

And now…

Now, they’d turn Apokoliptan tech on him.

ON DARKSEID!!

The planet trembled under the fury of Darkseid.

“FIGHT AND DIE! DIE! DIE!”

Another woman of Diamond shattered.

“EVERY MOMENT IS ANOTHER ETERNITY OF ANGUISH!”

Shadows tried to consume him, but Darkseid burned them off.

“EVERY FIST RAISED AGAINST ME SHALL BE TURNED AGAINST ALL YOU LOVE!”

He crushed a skull.

He ripped out a heart.

Bodies were crushed, burned, wrent, and mangled.

“I SHALL INFLICT TORMENT THE LIKES OF WHICH YOU CANNOT DREAM!”

He used the body of the Kryptonian girl to bludgeon Superman to death.

He burned the city and all in it to the ground.

“SO FIGHT!”

His arm was caught in a glowing lasso.

“AND DIE!”

His leg was caught in another.

“AND DIE AGAIN!”

Held in place for a second, the knight’s lance pierced his chest.

“UNTIL YOU BREAK!”

Night turned to day.

The world exploded into golden light as Rhongomyniad erupted, free of all its seals.

North America gained an inland sea.

And it wasn’t enough.

“UNTIL YOU SUBMIT!”

Darkseid was a fundamental force of this multiverse now, he had grasped the Anti-Life Equation.

Unless something beyond this reality intervened, he would never be destroyed.

But Death would not step in.

One being controlling one multiverse was nothing to her.

“UNTIL ALL IS DARKSEID!”

“You talk too much.”

Life, on the other hand, had a bone to pick with him.

“““Mikael!”””

“““Elden Lord!”””

The war froze.

Darkseid narrowed his eyes, hatred lighting a furnace in his chest at the sight of the man in bright clothes in front of him amidst the bodies and rubble.

“Sir Mikael,” the woman on the horse nodded imperiously, her face hidden behind her helmet. “I am pleased to have you to join us. Medea’s creation was successful, I take it.”

“Nope,” the man laughed, popping the ‘P’ for emphasis. “True body here, or a part of it at least.”

Darkseid’s Omega Beams tore through him.

And the heroes behind him.

And the mountains behind them.

They curved back, passing through the bodies of all gathered as they paused at the new arrival.

Not one person even acknowledged the attack.

“Where’d he go,” Superman asked, looking around urgently. “Where’s Darkseid?”

“Eh,” Mikael casually waved the Kryptonian away, even as Darkseid’s fist passed through his head. “I dealt with him. We’re good.”

“We’re… good?” Eidolon asked doubtfully.

“What about holding him off?” The man in red and gold armour asked, nonplussed as Darkseid howled in rage without acknowledgement. “What about fighting till you could come back and kill him?”

“You did that,” Mikael nodded. “You all did. Good job!”

The cheesy smile and exaggerated thumbs-up did not inspire confidence.

Darkseid tried to destroy the planet.

He passed through.

“You said it would be years,” Panacea deadpanned.

“’Could be,’” Mikael’s grin redoubled. “’Could be years.’ I was very upfront about the fact I didn’t know how long it would take.”

“It has only been a day,” Hippolyta pointed out, eyes wide. “You have already defeated him?”

“It’s less like I defeated him,” Mikael laughed. “It’s more like this entire multiverse is free of him.”

His wives realized what had happened at that moment.

In the next, they understood the pun and groaned.

“Please, Lord Husband. Cease,” Ranni said, covering her face with one hand. “Mar not this victory with more terrible wordplay, I beg.”

“I thought it was funny,” Robin said, chuckling. Mikael beamed at her. “So he’s still around?”

Not only around, Darkseid was right there, mind whirling on how to solve this new development.

But what could he do?

This multiverse was free of any consequence of his ongoing existence.

He didn’t matter anymore.

Nothing he did would ever matter again.

That was what it meant to be entirely free.

“Yep, yep,” Mikael nodded, his head bobbing up and down like a bobblehead. “See, I found a way to deal with him—get him out of our hair. But then, I had an even better idea.”

His grin became malicious.

“If everything is my true body, then can’t I still designate an Avatar?”

Most people looked confused.

His wives looked less so.

“That is…,” Diana hesitated, searching for the right word.

“Amazing,” Yoruichi clapped. “Is he still around here? I want to go first.”

“How tyrannical,” Ranni nodded in approval, face utterly impassive with a gleam in her eyes.

“For those of us really confused right now,” Hippolyta said, crossing her arms. “Can someone explain what is happening?”

“Darkseid is now our plaything,” Robin said, a vindictive gleam in her eye as well, as she hid her smile behind a hand. “How… ironic.”

“What he inflicted onto you all has been inflicted onto him,” Artoria explained grimly, taking no pleasure in the result but a resolute satisfaction. “It is justice in its most primal form—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

“A mind control for a mind control,” Pride giggled.

“Can I? Can I? Can I?” Yoruichi continued to ask like a child asking for candy.

“I was thinking someone else would get to go first,” Mikael laughed. “Emma, would you do the honours?”

One Emma Frost looked on, face set in a complex expression vacillated between love and hatred.

The second Emma Frost looked on, face carefully blank.

The third Emma Frost stepped forward.

The Elden Lord's consorts lit up with joy, some even cheering as they rushed to embrace the woman.

Much to the confusion of the hundreds of Supers gathered.

"Why are there three Emma Frosts?" Johnny Storm, the human torch, asked. "And all these new women? And who's this guy? What is happening? I am so confused."

"Nothing new," Ben Grimm rumbled.

"As always, your intellect fails to impress," the King of Latveria snifed haughtily. "How you are related to Susan is beyond Doom. The man is the being who freed us from the alien's control, and the women are part of his retinue. Three Emma Frosts is hardly surprising, either. The answer, as always, is either clones, robots, time travellers, dimensional counterparts, or shapeshifters."

"Why is it always clones," Susan Storm groaned.

"As always, Doom," Johnny Storm said with an exaggerated pompous attitude, imitating the supervillain. You fail to understand the depths of my inquiry. If you hadn't, you'd understand I was truly pondering the romantic status of these unfamiliar faces. For scientific and philosophical purposes only, of course."

"Give it up, Johnny," Ben sighed. "Let's figure out how long we were out and what happened during that time. Besides, I think at least one of them is taken."

After hugging her Family tightly and receiving many warm words welcoming her back, the Emma Frost who had stepped forward shoved her tongue down the Elden Lord's throat.

"But, but, but," Johnny Storm blubbered dramatically at his friend. "Triplets Ben! Triplets!"

After hearing the start of the conversation, Beast Boy and Winman approached and patted the older hero on the back.

"You get used to it," Beast Boy said, looking off into the distance and sighing.

"Darling," Mikael said with an exaggerated bow, gesturing at the New God nobody could perceive as Darkseid tried to kill him. "If you would."

"Darkseid," Emma Frost, having just separated from a kiss with her husband, said to the air. "Come here, and don't move."

Darkseid froze, fist raised, and mouth open. Not that anyone could see him but those Mikael allowed.

This universe was free of him, and he was free of all consequences.

He might as well not even exist.

Except Mikael wanted him to. He was petty like that.

And Emma knew what Mikael wanted.

"Never move. Never try and move. Never fight back. Never die. Suffer."

"Damn," Yoruichi let out a low whistle. "That's cold."

The Elden Lord looked at his wives, a silent communication passing between them all.

Then Emma and every other one of Mikael's wives returned home.

Mikael remained…

Or at least, *a* Mikael remained.

He was kind of everywhere at the moment.

"What… are we supposed to do now," Wonder Woman asked the Elden Lord, looking around.

The battle had been cataclysmic.

Nothing remained intact. Not buildings, not cities, not even the continental shelf.

Earth was a wreck.

If it weren't for the active engagement of the Parliaments, no life would be able to continue on it.

"What are you talking about?" Mikael looked at her in befuddlement. "You are still alive, aren't you? You're still free, aren't you? Do what heroes always do: fight."

"This…" Lex Luthor flew up, looking around at the destruction of his home. Already, civilians who had died in the fighting were coming back in a tiny spark of fire and looking around at the battlefield. "Fight what? For what? There's nothing left."

"You're left," Mikael sighed like he was talking to an idiot. "Everyone who chose to fight is still fighting. Still living. The world ended. Build a new. With blackjack. And hookers."

The Elden Lord sighed again at the looks he received.

"I don't understand what you aren't getting here. We lost. It happens. Then we won. That also happens. It's not over. It's never over until we give up."

Mikael gestured to the heroes, villains and civilians gathering in the wreckage of a dead world.

"You all, you all chose not to give up. Everyone still alive chose not to give up. We might not be fighting Darkseid anymore, but Life is a fight. It always will be. My Family and I can help. I will help. But you have to choose to keep that fight going. Otherwise, there's no point."

"You don't intend to stop providing this immortality," Hippolyta asked in realization. "Do you?"

"No," Mikael shook his head. "You all will still be able to die, but every time you do so, you will have that choice: to rest or to keep living, with all its suffering and joy that

entails." He paused, tilting his head in acknowledgement. "Well, I'll only keep offering it to those who don't cross my bottom line. I'm still me, after all."

"So it's a threat," Captain Marvel said, eyes narrowed. "Do what you say or die? Have we changed one tyrant for another?"

"I'm not a saint," Mikael rolled his eyes. "I don't want to be a saviour, god, or whatever. If you plan on doing something you think I won't like, just don't die. I won't smite you. I just won't give you the choice when you do die. That is all I will do. Give a choice. It is up to you all to live with the consequences of your choices."

"Aren't you powerful enough to undo all this?" A civillian asked. "Aren't you powerful enough to fix the world?"

"I am," Mikael nodded easily. "I could snap my fingers, and it would be like nothing ever happened."

He could Free the world from its damage.

He could have completely freed this universe from the last few days entirely. Made it so it never happened.

Some people started asking him to do just that, but Mikael continued.

"Of course, that would kill all of you. People who looked like you, talked like you, and had your memories up to Darkseid would be alive in this new world. The 'you' of now, the 'you' who chose to fight, to face reality head-on, who have experienced all this pain and suffering, who now have to build a new world, none of you will exist."

"You could just bring our memories over as well," Xavier pointed out, pushed forward by Cyclops.

"Ah, yes," Mikael nodded sarcastically. "It's not your choices that matter, just the consequences, right?"

"Don't be a dick, Mikael," Hippolyta said with a roll of her eyes. Her daughters and the amazons who had died on Themyscira all looked at her in shock. "Explain it properly to them."

"Nobody lets me have fun," Mikael pouted with crossed arms. Tens of thousands of eyes were looking at him, and he sighed. "Fine. You might not have destroyed the world yourselves or been unable to stop it, but it happened. I can make it seem like it never happened, but it did. And it will happen again. And again. And again. Do I reset it every time for you? What's the cutoff?"

"Can't you stop it?"

"Again, what do I stop, and what do I let through. Do I stop every villain attack, every two-bit crime? Do I stop every little fistfight? Then I really will be just like Darkseid. Your entire lives would be up to my whim. I don't want that. You don't want that. That is why I

am doing things this way."

Mikael looked around, and to everyone on Earth, it seemed like he was looking right at them.

Talking to them directly.

"Everyone wants Freedom. Everyone. Nobody wants to pay the price for that freedom, but we all have to—in time, in pain, in money, in fear. I will never take that Freedom from you, so I cannot take those consequences either. All I will do is give you a choice and a helping hand as you face them yourselves."

Then Mikael was gone, leaving the Earth to rebuild.

******

The Family appeared at the mansion, bearing good news of the return of their missing sister.

Two, however, appeared in ruin covered in ash.

"You are as dramatic as always," Emma said with a fond sigh.

"It's appropriate, I think," Mikael smiled at her, eyes alight with warmth and love. "Besides, would you have me any other way?"

"No. I wouldn't."

They both looked at the immobile form of Darkseid in the center of the Kiln of the First Flame.

Mikael cupped his hands, and Breathed.

A tiny spark flowed from his mouth, and he held it for a second, looking at the flames that had been his life for countless years.

Mikael released the spark, and it flowed toward Darkseid.

As soon as it touched him, he lit up with fire.

The flames of Life and Freedom spread, filling up the Kiln of the First Flame and powering a system of immortality pioneered by a Dragon of Magic.

Darkseid could not scream in those soul-searing fires.

Mikael knew he would have if he could.

The Fires of the First Flame were not something one could bear without pain so deep one wished for madness.

The pair watched fires, free from its touch.

"Do you know why you lost?" Mikael asked the tyrant in the flames.

"You were stronger than me. Smarter than me. Faster than me. Had better preparations than me. You took me by surprise. That is why you won in the beginning.

I won in the end because I was pettier, more egotistical, more selfish, and because I cheated. You deserve the win. I took it. That's life for you."

Only the crackling of the First Flame echoed in the Kiln at Mikael's words.

"He's going to be alone here, isn't he?"

"I would only inflict this on those who manage to take what is Mine," Mikael nodded. "From here on out, nobody will ever be able to hurt me like he did. So yes, he will."

He could erase her death from ever happening.

He wouldn't.

That pain he had felt, that loss, that rage.

It was a part of him. A part of his life.

Mikael had his happy ending, but he refused to forget the journey that led him to it, in all its joy and sorrow.

If he did forget, he wouldn't be 'Mikael.'

"Medea will be around from time to time, though."

"The others are telling her what happened right now," Emma smiled. "She's already thinking of which experiments to run now that her system is in place."

"Oh, her too. I was actually thinking of Fat Floof. An infinitely regenerating source of Tier 11 food, a warm place with many tight spaces, and someone to lord it all over? I'm sure this will be her favourite part of the Island in a week."

"That cat," Emma sighed, shaking her head. "Though, I think the others would prefer that over her continuing to eat people, villains or not."

"Are you sure? I've been wracking my brains about how to justify myself to them about burning him forever. Ironic Justice is one thing; this was petty, vindictive revenge."

"You're not doing anything that hasn't been done to you. And… they might not show it, but they were hurting just as much as you."

"I know. That's what happens when you lose Family. Speaking of which, we should join them. We can start helping build this new world tomorrow. Tonight, I just want to have a nice Family dinner."

"Have you decided what to do with my new counterpart?"

"You are dead set on having a threesome with yourself, aren't you?"

"It has been a fantasy for a few months now, I will admit. The only downside was that I would have to deal with Emma Frost. She is me, not her, so nothing is holding me back now."

"I feel bad for her. I still am not The Company's equal." "Yet." "So I can't undo what was done to her. And she isn't My Emma." "Yet." "So I don't feel the same way about her as I do you. For now, we'll just take it one day at a time."

“And Hippolyta? What about her?”

“Jeeze, I thought I was supposed to be the randy bastard. Let a guy enjoy his time with his Family before you try and grow it, why don’t you? Have some shame, you horny wench!”

“Shame? What is that? Can I sleep with it?”

It was the joke.

It was Emma throwing his old words back at him.

It was the sheer relief of having her back with him.

It was all that and more that had Mikael laughing as they left Darkseid to burn in the fires of the First Flame.

******

“A bit heavy-handed,” Death said, sipping her drink. “But that’s just who you are.”

“Nobody appreciates my theatrics,” Life sighed dramatically, sipping his drink as well. Then, just to be a petty bitch, said: “Sip.”

Both looked out over what was once the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, Canada.

The table and the cups were the same, but nothing remained of the Deli that once stood there.

Once they rebuilt and started exploring this changed world, those who had chosen Life and Freedom would eventually discover this location.

The Rockies were gone, destroyed in the fight against Darkseid.

In their place, at least in this area, was an enormous flat plateau that breached the clouds and spread for miles.

Very little greenery remained of the thick forests that once covered this area.

As far as the eye could see, it was rock, dirt, and clouds.

And a table with two chairs.

“Did you expect this?” Mikael asked casually. “Was this your plan?”

“Not even in my wildest predictions,” Death shook her head. “I knew you could reach this point eventually, but to skip Tier 11 entirely was well beyond what I foresaw.”

“What method did you predict me choosing?”

“Because of Defences, your Element, and the nature of your existence, I couldn’t say anything for certain. Before you finished your sentence, I would have expected you to become Freedom. After you were finished with it, I expected you to become Life, either through the Phoenix or some other way. I could not be happier to be proven wrong.”

"… I see. I get it now. 'You' didn't exist, did you?"

"I am Death. The End. I simply was. I have no self to speak of. Then, The Company sent a contractor to my section of the omniverse, and, for the first time, there was something that wasn't 'me.' It was a boundary. A limit. 'I' was everything but 'That.' And… I wondered what was beyond 'Me.' That was 'My' first conscious thought."

"You said that so many times," Mikael chuckled. "You even explained it to me, and I was too thick to understand."

She was Death. That was the words Life used for her. But Death was but a fraction of what she was.

She was The End.

The end of a word. The end of life. The end of a hair.

When a piece of wood fragmented, she witnessed that end.

When a sound died, when a star winked out, when the multiverses collapsed, she was that end.

And when nothing became something, she was the end of nothing.

The End.

A concept higher than Death.

A concept so high that it couldn't even be personified until it became conscious of its own End, its own limit.

"So," The End asked. "After everything, will you still honour our Deal? Or am I out of luck? Will you Free me?"

"What are you talking about?" Existence grinned at her. "Don't you know who I am? I am Life. Existence."

He was Life. But Life was but a fraction of what he was.

He was Everything.

A word. A life. A hair.

When a piece of wood fragmented, he was what came before and the pieces that were birthed from that End.

A sound echoing, a star burning, the multiverses growing, he was everything.

And when something became nothing, he was that nothing.

Existence.

A concept higher than Life.

A concept so high that only a truly mad man with an ego would claim it.

"Everything that exists, that chooses to be Free, that chooses to fight for that Freedom, will be. And last I checked, The End exists."

"Be careful, Existence," End laughed. "All that Exists will eventually End."

“I know—I know that more than anyone. But until Existence Ends, until nothing is left to End, ‘You’ will still be ‘Me’… And call me Mikael. Too many ‘E’ words will get confusing.”

“Mikael then,” Death nodded, setting down her finished cup. “Shall we see what is beyond us?”

“That sounds like fun.”

******

Seven Months Later

“IT’S HAPPENING!”

Batman dove, tucking and rolling and coming up in a crouch, ready to defend himself from whoever managed to infiltrate the base.

Mikael, with a wild look in his eyes, just looked at the hero and yelled again.

“BATS! IT’S HAPPENING! HELP!”

And then he was gone.

Batman knew Mikael was messing with him.

He knew that even now, the omnipotent being that he occasionally drank with was still watching him. Watching everything.

Batman knew with certainty what reaction Mikael wanted.

Batman knew all that, so he didn’t sigh and palm his face to avoid giving Mikael the satisfaction he wanted.

No matter how much Batman wanted to.

“Superdad!” Mikael yelled, appearing in the Kryptonian’s backyard. “I am not ready! Send help!”

Jon, whom Clark had been pushing on his swing, yelped and flew off. Clark naturally caught him.

His newest child just clapped her chubby hands at the surprise appearance of one of her favourite people and let out a burbling laugh.

“Mikael,” Superman sighed but with a smile. “You’ll be fine.”

“No, I won’t!” he declared, eyes wide. “I definitely won’t! This is it, Superman. I can feel it in my bones. It’s the end of the world!”

“Stop over-exaggerating,” Lois sighed, clutching her daughter to her so the baby Kryptonian hybrid couldn’t fly off.

If nothing else, Life and Freedom allowed her to grow strong enough to not be

bulldozed by her children.

Now, if only the local draconic deity wasn't just as childish.

"Aren't you literally omnipotent," Supergirl asked, confused. "How can you be scared of anything?"

"Like this!" Mikael said, pointing at his face.

Then he was gone again.

The baby started crying.

Superman sighed.

"Valeria!"

"Mikael!"

"Help!"

"OK!"

Susan Storm sighed as the local deity, who apparently had become friends with her daughter, appeared, said two words, and disappeared with her.

"I do not like her spending so much time with him," Reed Richards said. "He's a bad influence."

"Nah," Johnny waived off, not even taking his eyes from the screen of the game he was playing with Franklin. "Mikael's chill. You just don't like him because you can't stop him. Hey! What did I say about using powers?"

Franklin stuck out his tongue at his uncle.

"Amelia!"

"No."

"Help!"

"No."

"Pretty please?"

"No."

"Ames," Vicky wined. "He's the boss! And we still owe him!"

"Don't care. Comfortable. No."

"Don't be like that," Artemisia said, taking her arms from around the healer's body and standing her up. "We can cuddle later. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event."

"No, it's not," Amy denied, glaring at the man looking at her with panic-filled eyes as if it was his fault. Because it was. "This will happen again in three months. Then, a month after that. Then two months after that!"

"AAAAHHHHH" Mikael screamed, grasping his head dramatically. "You're right! I'm doomed! DOOMED!"

"Yes, but it only happens the first time once," the Amazon cajoled, not paying any

mind to the screams. They all knew what type of ham Mikael was. “I know you are curious about the biology.”

“Fine,” the biokinetic sighed, not letting her eagerness at the prospect show. “Let’s get this over with.”

“DOOOOOMMMMMMED!”

Despite how ‘doomed’ Mikael sounded and acted, nobody was screaming or panicking when they appeared on the Island.

In fact, Mikael looked the picture of peace and calm as he sat with the rest of his wives in the large sitting room.

Amy glared.

He grinned.

Amy glared harder.

He laughed.

Valeria laughed.

Diana swatted them both behind the head.

“You couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“I regret nothing!”

“I regret nothing!”

“I can’t tell if he’s going to be a great father or the worst,” Yoruichi ‘whispered’ to Robin as they looked at the ten-million-year-old omnipotent dragon god high-five the thirteen-year-old girl.

“The worst,” the pirate giggled, rubbing her pregnant stomach. “But a little bit of chaos makes life interesting, doesn’t it?”

“You say that now,” Amy grumbled. “Just wait until a dozen of the little snot rags are running around. This is why being gay is the way to go.”

“Thank you for coming, Amelia,” Artoria greeted the healer. “We all trust everything to end well, but having your aid is still appreciated.”

“Yes, well,” Amy coughed awkwardly and looked away. She still had a thing for blondes. Artoria, with her charisma and… ‘Artoria’ness, was still her perfect type. “No problem.”

Normally, Amelia would feel a bit awkward about the sheer obviousness of her crush, but her girlfriend had confessed that half of the Amazons were trying to seduce one member of the Family or another.

So far, no luck, but according to the most recent betting pool, there were good odds that their Queen would manage it within the next century.

“So,” Vicky looked around the room. “How long until the big moment?”

“We don’t know,” Glynda sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “She went into labour a while ago, and we haven’t heard anything yet.”

“That’s good news,” Melina said, and the white phoenix on her shoulder trilled in agreement. “This lug would be flipping out if something had gone wrong.”

“That wasn’t him flipping out?” Amy deadpanned.

“No,” Priscilla said as if explaining something obvious. “T’was just Sir Bard putting on a performance.”

“It shouldn’t be long until they are born now,” Medea said, looking toward the master bedroom of the house.

“Oh, they were born about ten minutes ago.”

All eyes looked at Mikael.

He smiled back innocently.

Most scrambled up the stairs rather than try to throttle the man, as some wanted to do.

The double doors opened, revealing Tsunade lying in bed with two little bundles in her arms.

Mikael was there with her, watching all three of them with love and joy in his eyes.

Tsunade looked at them all after they hurried to pour into the room, raising an eyebrow. Then she looked at the Mikael beside her.

“I take it they did not, in fact, choose to give us some time alone?”

Mikael just smilled impishly.

“He didn’t tell us until just now,” Diana said, slowly stepping into the large room. “No issues, I hope.”

“None,” Tsunade shook her head, looking down at her sons and smiling softly. “My clones handled everything.”

“Speak for yourself,” Mikael huffed. “I had to kill myself. Twice! A word of warning to you all. Don’t become Great Ones. It’s not worth the hassle.”

“Noted,” Amy snarked.

“May I?” Emma asked, stepping forward with arms extended.

Tsunade passed the one in her right arm to her, and the chubby little boy stirred sleepily.

As the newborn yawned, green draconic eyes flitted open under a tuft of light blond hair. Then he went right back to sleep.

Seeing her friend’s eagerness, Tsunade passed her second boy to Medea, who held him gently and smiled.

This one didn’t wake up, even as people gathered to coo and awe at his chubby cheeks

and curly brown hair.

“Congratulations,” Ranni said, smiling at the new parents. “Hast names been decided upon?”

“We have,” Tsunade smiled, watching her Family with her children. “I named the blond Senju Jiraiya. After my teammate.”

“And that,” Mikael said proudly, pointing at the other newborn. “Is Senju Sarig. Don’t let his laziness fool you. He’s going to have his mother’s temper. I just know it.”

“Why that name,” Scathach asked, looking at Sarig.

“It’s from the same language as my name,” Mikael grinned. “I’m not religious, but I love me a consistent theme. It’s not a common name, nor is it one of those obnoxious names trying to be unique. That and alliteration. Love that too.”

Tsunade rolled her eyes but still smiled at her sons.

Then Robin started giggling.

And giggling harder.

All eyes locked on the woman, who managed to squeeze out an explanation between peels of laughter.

“Pfft, translate the name ‘sarig’,” Robin told them between chuckles.

“Which language,” Yoruichi asked, not understanding the joke, as there were a few translations for the word depending on the language.

“He already said it,” Melina sighed in despair as she face-palmed. “The same one as his name.”

All eyes turned to Mikael, who was barely containing his laughter.

“Branch?”

“Closer to ‘vine’,” Glynda corrected Artoria with a sigh.

“Mi.ka.el!” Tsunade growled, knuckles popping. “Did you just name our son Sarig for a PUN!”

As he was thrown out his window, Mikael was laughing in joy.

Author's Note:

Done.

Rapturous Rhapsody is done.

Almost two years and 750k words later, it is done.

It might not have been for everyone, but it was mine.

And it's done.

I have so much to say, so many thoughts, and so many feelings that I don't know what to say. I'll save most of it for an extended note, which I will release on Monday for those interested.

For now, I will just say this:

Thank you for reading.

You didn't have to love it.

You don't have to really like it, though if you've reached this point, I assume you like some parts of it.

Still, whether you love or hate it, whether you've been here from the beginning or only started reading after it was marked complete.

Thank you.

So... What now?

First off, this marks the end of the weekly releases for Rapturous Rhapsody.

I have plans for omakes, one-shots, and side stories, mostly focusing on characters who didn't get their time in the sun or ideas that might be fun. However, those will be released as I please instead of consistently so it will be a while.

Secondly, I will focus on On The Bench, my DxD/AOT fanfic, until that is done rather than starting a third story. In May, OTB will return to two chapters a week until it is completed, probably sometime this summer.

Finally, I will say this to everyone who has reached this point.

I hope you are inspired by my work, whether you like it or hate it. I hope you create something from that inspiration.

I hope you live life, not free of every challenge, but able to overcome every challenge placed in your way. Whether that is naysayers or critics, pain or loss.

We live in a harsh world. Anyone who denies that denies reality.

But, for all the pain and suffering life brings, there is happiness for those who continue to throw themselves against the Wall that is 'Life' until it breaks.

So, from one nameless undead to another, I say this:

Be safe, friend.
Don't you dare go hollow.

Epilogue Side Stories

TWO TERRIBLE TWINS TRAVEL THROUGH TROUBLED TIMES I

Xiao Tian remained vigilant as he drove the carriage through the rough roads that wound through the Lung Mountain Range.

Unlike his fellow Sect Brothers, he had grown up with nothing and spent years in this wilderness after his family was exterminated. He knew very well that even the roads were not safe.

Bandits. Beasts. Wandering Cultivators.

One wrong move, or simple bad luck, could spell death.

The other three disciples who had joined this mission weren't so vigilant as they walked beside the carriage.

It was an easy mission.

Escort the Second Elder's youngest daughter toward Wulin City for an inspection. They were there more for formality and appearance's sake than for protection, as the area was all well within the Twin Heavens Sect's influence.

Even the beasts of the Lung Mountain Range, this close to the strongest sect in the empire, knew to bow their heads when the tiger descended the mountain.

Xiao Tian wished they would be more alert but knew that his warnings would fall on deaf ears as, technically, they were all above him in the sect rankings.

His true cultivation, middle Spirit Building, was well concealed and everyone thought he was in the late Foundation Laying realm. A talented disciple, based on his speed, but not a noteworthy one.

The only reason he had even joined this mission was to have his 'breakthrough' to Spirit Building in Wulin, really the late stage of the realm, well away from any curious eyes in the sect.

It wouldn't do for any of the higher ups noticing his real cultivation, or worse, his unique Bloodline.

"Junior Disciple Xiao Tian," a delicate voice echoed from the inside of the carriage, as melodious as a bird's song. "You are tense. Have you discovered anything?"

"Replying to the Young Miss," Xiao Tian answered dutifully, keeping his eyes on the road even as he felt the other disciples' eye bore into the back of his skull. "The Lung Mountain Range is full of dangers and disasters. There have even been rumors of demonic cultivators recently. Until we are beyond the mountains, this Xiao Tian will remain on

guard for any eventuality."

His tone was formal and humble, keeping a strict distance between him and the occupant as propriety demanded.

It wasn't enough.

"There is nothing to worry about Junior Brother," one of the other disciples, Mu Bang, 'reassured' Xiao Tian with a condescending look as he led the way. "Any beast that nears will taste my saber. You need only to stay on the carriage."

"Much appreciated Senior Brother." Xiao Tian, despite knowing he was being mocked, simply nodded in acceptance.

And didn't lower his guard.

"You should follow Xiao Tian's example," the delicate voice chimed in again. "Caution and wariness are virtues to cultivate, as much as power."

"Young Miss is wise," Mu Bang bowed toward the carriage, his words repeated by the other two disciples who walked on the flanks.

Despite so, Xiao Tian didn't miss the fact that the young man was grimacing in glaring at him.

The carriage driver sighed internally, pretending not to have noticed.

'The favor of a beauty is not something to lament.'

'It is not that I am unhappy with it, master,' Xiao Tian told the spirit in his ring. 'Merely that the troubles it brings is not worth the meager benefits.'

'And you have your sights set higher,' the old man chuckled.

Xiao Tian didn't respond.

Yes, Ling Mei was a beauty every sect disciple longed for.

Not only was she the Second Elder's youngest daughter, but she was also the most talented member of the Twin Heavens Sect of the younger generation.

With the Pure Spring Divine Body, she was widely regarded as the next in line to inherit the Sect Master position. Despite being only a few years older than Xiao Tian, she had stepped into the Golden Core realm. By the time she was thirty, she would likely be a Profound Sky cultivator, able to fly through the air with just a thought.

Since even Elders were only Nascent Soul cultivators, one step higher than the Profound Sky, one could imagine how strong she would be in a century.

Not only was she dedicated to cultivation, but her personality was admired throughout the sect. Just, kind to other disciples, and wise, Ling Mei was a figure every woman wanted to be, and every man wanted to be with.

It was thanks to her that he was here. As a reward for saving her maid, she had assigned him as the carriage driver for this mission despite him 'only' being in the

Foundation realm.

In a way, it was a way to reward him without seeming to play favorites. The rewards for this mission, despite the task being so simple and easy, were enormous and it gave one the chance to interact not only with Ling Mei, but also with the higher ups of Wulin, which could pave the way for a smooth life in the sect.

All in all, having Ling Mei's favor, even if it was only lightly, was a good thing now and could blossom into a great thing later.

Xiao Tian, despite keeping secrets from the sect, was handsome, talented, and undefeated in his realm. Already, his meteoric rise to Outer Disciple in the year with the sect had been noted and, once he 'broke through' in Wulin, he'd be promoted to Inner Disciple.

Of the younger generation in the Twin Heavens Sect, Xiao Tian knew himself to be the best match for Ling Mei, though she didn't know it yet due to his secrets. Trying to secure himself as her cultivation partner wouldn't be too hard, in his mind.

If Xiao Tian wished to stay with the Twin Heavens Sect that is.

But he had no wish to remain a frog in this small well.

'Telling you about the larger world was a mistake,' his master, the old war god Wang Xiang, sighed when Xiao Tian didn't reply. 'A carp in a pond is just as happy as a dragon in the sea.'

'I will not be a carp.'

For revenge against whoever had killed his family.

For the power to never have that happen again.

Xiao Tian would not remain a fish in a small pond, knowing that the Twin Heavens Sect was only the most powerful sect when considering their province at the corner of the continent.

Thus, the darling of the sect everyone else lusted over could not enter his eyes.

Not when he had seen true beauty.

'Do not let ambition cloud reason,' his master warned. 'Those two would be the pride of any clan on the central continent. Something from the Wu province on the Eastern continent should not be worth the anything to them. The Twin Heavens Sect must have used all its luck for them to wish to learn its techniques. Once they are done, they will leave.'

'Then I must find a way to interact with them more,' Xiao Tian replied stubbornly. 'Heavens have given me this chance and I will not waste it.'

'Your eyes have grown larger than your stomach.'

'The tournament is in a month. When I win, I'll get the chance to spend a few hours

learning from them. That is my chance. What happens after that…'

The rest went unsaid, but Wang Xiang knew his disciple to be a man with unwavering belief in himself in his heart.

But as much as confidence and daring were needed to progress, self-awareness was even more important.

'In all my life, I have never known of the Diamond Dragon Body. Nor have I heard of this 'Long Island' Sect, yet it managed to nurture twins with such a domineering physique. They are not simple.'

'If I can get their primordial Yin, my Void God Bloodline will certainly evolve,' Xiao Tian stubbornly insisted. 'Even the Sect Leader wishes for them to be seduced into the sect, that's why he set up this tournament. Once I win, I will have the full support of the Elders.'

Ostensibly this tournament was to show the honored guests the 'most promising youths of the Twin Heavens Sect.' The winner, on top of Spirit Stones and a treasure from the sect, would be allowed to 'exchange knowledge with the guests.'

Really, it was the Twin Heavens Sect Master setting up an excuse to deepen ties. Specifically, he hoped someone in his sect would catch their eyes. Why else would his chosen successor, Ling Mei, not participate?

'… I did not tell you, but I believe they knew we were there when they met the Sect Leader.'

'What!?' Xiao Tian was so socked by his master's words that he almost spoke aloud and jerked the reins on the tiger-horses. 'That's impossible!'

'There is nothing impossible with enough strength.' The old war god said grimly. 'It was only for a moment, faster than you could see, but one looked directly at you.'

'Impossible!' Xiao Tian repeated, this time in disbelief rather than rejection.

The Void God bloodline, at the second tier, allowed one to separate their consciousness from their body for short periods. During this time, they were undetectable and unblock able.

Not useful for a fight, as in that state Xiao Tian could not interact with anything, but it was a key to his success. It was what allowed him to search the sect library for techniques, travel through hidden realms and discover their traps, and hunt beasts in the Lung Mountain Range.

And what had allowed him to discover the goal he must strive for.

When the higher ups of the sect suddenly started forcing every disciple to be on their best behavior, dress in their best robes, and for the most talented to attend a welcoming event, Xiao Tian had to be there.

The fact he, a lowly outer disciple, hadn't been invited was irrelevant to the young man who

treated the Twin Heavens Sect like his back yard thanks to his Void God Bloodline.

So, when the two most beautiful women in the world descended from the heavens where the Sect Master and Elders waited to receive them, Xiao Tian had been in the background.

Even the old war god in his ring had his breath stolen by the twin women and their exotic and enchanting appearance.

With hair that shone so golden it glowed like the richest spirit dew, skin so clear and pure that it glittered like diamond, and eyes the blue of eternal frost, none had been able to resist the charm of these goddesses.

Not only had their demeanor been impeccable, a cool pride and elegance in them, but their bodies were amazingly framed by the tight robes they wore. What should be thin was thin and what should be plump was… extra plump.

After the greetings and formalities were out of the way, Xiao Tian had followed the pair and the sect master into a private room, unwilling to stop looking at them.

He desperately wanted to know who these two goddesses were and why they had come.

Eavesdropping on that meeting, he learned that not only were they from a high-level holy land, the Long Island Sect, but that they were here to request the Twin Heavens' core cultivation manuals due to its unique comparability with their rare physiques.

Normally such a request would be absurd.

A sect's core cultivation technique was its pillar and base. While treasures were what allowed a sect to defend itself, the central cultivation manuals were what allowed it to exist in the first place.

To be a sect was to have a unique cultivation manual and a spiritual land on which to practice it. Without either, one was no different than any other cultivator.

As expected, the Sect Leader was firmly against that request. He remained polite at Shuang Ai's insistence, likely fearing the power behind them, but refused to yield.

And yet, when Shuang Aima started pulling out treasures that even Wang Xiang salivated over, his firm stance started to waiver.

By the third treasure that could elevate the sect by a level, the Sect Master proposed that the twins could learn the manuals if they joined the sect.

Another treasure. A Spirit Blade that glowed with radiant light.

Even if they only joined the sect in name, it would be acceptable.

Another treasure. A beautiful bloodflower with meaty petals.

If they recognized the Sect Master as their master and became his disciples, it would be acceptable.

Another treasure. A beast horn suffused with spirituality.

If they simply chose a partner with whom to dual cultivate among the Twin Heavens, it

would be acceptable.

Both Shuang Ai and Shuang Aima froze, neither so much as twitching as they looked at the Sect Master of the Twin Heavens Sect.

For that moment, they looked like the most beautiful statues of white jade ever conceived under heaven and Xiao Tian had felt his heart thunder in his chest.

They were considering it!

And if they were considering it, it meant he might have a chance!

Their beauty, their physique, their connections… It would all be Xiao Tian's!

Certainly, he'd need to start standing out in the sect if he wanted to fight for this opportunity, but Xiao Tian knew felt that even if he was starting from behind, nobody would be able to stop him from rising.

Heavens had provided exactly what he needed for his future.

Unfortunately, they still had one more treasure to offer.

And, with a great reluctance, the pair pulled out an object that radiated power throughout the room.

"This is a treasure created by the greatest witch in the world. A being descended from gods." Shuang Ai held up the small figure of a white dragon with six wings in her hands. "Created in image of her husband."

"Wh- hum." The Sect Master, his demeanor completely broken by the power of the object, hurried to regain his composure. "What is it?"

"A sect defining treasure," Shuang Ai Mu said gravely. "Our Master gave us permission to offer it if negotiations went a certain way. Should you connect it to Dragon Veins of your sect and activate it with the chant, it will increase the fate of the entire sect and draw in the ambient Qi from thousands of Li, increasing its density."

Greed shone in the Sect Master's eyes. A mad greed.

The difference in ambient Qi was what made the difference in the quality of Sects. Twin Heavens was already the hegemon of the region. If the ambient Qi rose higher, they could even grow to dominate the entire province in a century… or even the continent in a few millennia.

More importantly, higher ambient Qi would allow the Sect Master to breakthrough his bottleneck, growing his power and extending his lifespan.

Good for the sect and good for himself.

A sect defining treasure indeed.

But the Sect Master, for all his greed was not a young fool.

"Were it so valuable, why has the Long Island Sect not used it?"

"Because it only works on below a certain threshold of Qi. Were we to use it, it would be destroyed by the power it absorbed."

There was a grim certainty in Shuang Aima's words as she stared down the Sect Master.

'Either he takes the deal, respectfully rejects it, or they take what they want,' his master had sighed as the Sect Master's face went grim. 'They have been overly generous already. Were he to require more for the cultivation technique of a measly Twin Heavens sect he would be inviting doom.'

'Why offer so much if they could just seize it?'

'Because what they offer is nothing to them,' the old war god explained mater-of-factly. 'To everyone on this continent, or even the Central Continent, it is an object worth fighting a war over. But these two? This Long Island Sect? They probably have more. Or have used so many that this one is worthless to them. Maybe they even have a refiner who knows how to create these treasures.'

Even Xiao Tian felt a mad greed welling up inside him at the idea of being able to create such a treasure.

The Sect Master, recognizing when he was beat yet still needing to save face, finally spoke up.

"I can agree on the condition that while learning our Twin Mind Spirit technique you remain as honored guests of our sect and make a vow on the heavens that you shall not spread it around," he said seriously, even as he reached out to grasp the small statue. "In exchange, I will have a few of our more talented disciples will attend you and aid you in learning it during your stay."

"Very well," Shuang Ai nodded easily, handing over the white dragon. "We shall graciously accept your hospitality."

"In the spirit of such hospitality, I shall give you a warning," Shuang Aima said, standing with her sister. "The greatest power of that item is not its ability to gather Qi, but to affect fate. Those deemed… unfit by fate will suffer and those who are beloved by it will rise. Do not be surprised if opportunities grow more frequent for your sect. But all opportunities carry risk."

"I understand," the Sect Master nodded gravely.

'Greed. Ah, greed,' Xiao Tian's master intoned. 'Great changes will come to the Twin Heavens Sect. You better hope it is not too weak to grasp such a fate as that treasure will bring or it will become a disaster.'

Xiao Tian didn't say anything at the regret that tinged the old war god's words, listening intently to the Sect Master's final question and Shuang Aima's answer.

"What is the method to activate it?"

"One only needs to place their hands on it and repeat thirteen times the word 'Muda.'"

'It was when she said that strange world that Shuang Aima looked right at you,' Xiao Tian's master explained. 'It is possible that the Diamond Dragon Body either counteracts your Void God

bloodline or provides a sensing ability.'

'If they know about me, all the more reason I need to win the tournament.' Xiao Tian, far from being dissuaded, doubled down. 'To convince them to keep the secret, if nothing else. If we are compatible, then I must become their attendant. From there, I refuse to believe I will not be able to secure a position with them.' Feeling that he hadn't convinced the old man, the carriage driver hurried to add another point. 'Besides, aren't you curious about their sect and it's leader?'

Wang Xiang didn't respond.

He really was curious about this Mai Keer and this 'Long Island Sect.'

What were they doing in this remote corner of the world?

Were they from the central continent? If so, they might know what had happened after his fall.

'For now, be careful,' the spirit gave up after a bit more nagging. 'Once you return to the sect, don't use your bloodline recklessly.'

'I understand.'

The carriage continued to trundle along without issues for another few hours without incident, and as they drew closer to the base of the mountain range even Xiao Tian felt that this trip would pass quietly.

He might even have been right.

Had this been a story about Xiao Tian, he very well might have reached Wulin without incident.

While there, he would have encountered some conspiracy or opportunity that not only gave him the chance to 'breakthrough' but would also help him raise his reputation before returning to the sect.

In the process, it was almost inevitable that the vague fondness Ling Mei felt for this Junior Brother would transform into a fascination or even affection.

After returning to the sect, winning the tournament and shocking everyone, Xiao Tian would naturally interact more with the Shuang twins, slowly getting involved with their mysterious background. They would discover his own uniqueness and, in the process also become helpers in his inevitable rise towards the heavens.

Because that was what it was about for Xiao Tian and everyone else in this world.

Rising to the heavens.

Every cultivator, from the lowliest sect servant to the greatest Holy Lord.

Every. Single. One.

Thought it would be them.

That they were the ones destined to reach the top.

Everyone had opportunities, conflicts, losses, and expanded enormous efforts. After

all, they were the protagonist.

Everyone can only live their own life and cultivators, with their long lives and myopic views, were certain that they were the special ones. The world's protagonist.

The universe, in all its Qi and treasures, existed solely for them to plunder and grow strong off of.

Some, those wiser or more downtrodden, understood the folly of that thought. Understood the mountain of corpses piled to reach the ever-distant peak.

They understood the odds that they would be the singular victor in the end was minuscule.

Yet, despite those odds… It was going to be them.

Nobody else.

A cultivator *needed* to have that mentality.

Those that didn't, or who lost it along life's tribulations, were not cultivators.

And Xiao Tian had better reason to believe that the most.

Despite the hardship of life, he was practically favored by fortune. A mentor beyond any other. Talent beyond any other. Luck beyond any other.

The path to the top was practically paved for him, lined with flowers and cheers, and all he needed was to walk it.

With the focus only on his own hardships, blind to those who suffered just as much, more, or differently than him, Xiao Tian had the motivation to walk that blood-soaked road, using any tool to reach that ever distant peak of heaven.

Were this a xianxia or xuanhuan novel, Xiao Tian would be the true protagonist.

But this wasn't a xuanhuan web novel.

It did not begin when a young boy began his ascension to the heavens.

No.

This was a children's story.

It really began something like this:

Once upon a time, a long time ago, a luxurious carriage was traveling through a magical wood.

Pulled by magnificent horses and guarded by righteous swordsmen, this carriage came from a mystical land to carry its princess to a far-off kingdom.

Alas, as the carriage neared the edge of the magical forest, it was stopped.

"Halt!" A male voice cried as figures emerged from the trees to block the carriage. "This mountain was built by us!"

"These trees were planted by us!" A second male voice added.

"This road was opened by us!" The first continued.

“If you want to use this road, you have to pay the toll.” The second forged ahead.

““Break this rule at your own peril!”” The pair finished as one.

Indeed, the carriage and its guards had been walleyed by bandits!

Before reaching safety, these magical swordsmen must overcome the perilous trial!

Dumbfounded by their profound misfortune, the Sect Disciples could only stare in shocked silence.

“”Yes!”” The two bandits cheered gleefully as they high fived each other in excitement. “”Nailed it!””

The guards, given a moment to compose themselves, finally responded to this grave threat to their wellbeing and that of their charge.

“Do not mess around!” Mu Bang growled, vein throbbing on his temple at the sight in front of him. H felt like he was being mocked in front of his dream woman, which would not stand. “Step aside or don’t blame us for being impolite!”

The evil bandits were extremely daring, however, and were not intimidated even when facing this magic swordsman.

Facing the disciples of a righteous sect, the bandits remained arrogant as the first one stepped forward, followed by the second.

“Men, raise your hands! We came here to snatch money, not to snatch women!”

“Women, raise your legs! We came here to snatch women, not to snatch money!”

Dumbfounded by this, Mu Bang gaped at the pair for a second, as they celebrated again.

““Two out of three!”” The evil robbers declared in triumph, jumping around in excitement.

““Two out of three!”” They repeated, their no doubt malicious joy at some perfidious idea unable to be abated by the shock of their innocent victims.

Eventually, that shock transformed into rage at the injustice being levied against them.

For what heroes would they be if they allowed this injustice to continue in front of them?

“We are disciples of the Twin Heavens Sect on an important mission!” Mu Bang shouted amidst the cheering. The vein on his temple was a blazing purple against his clear skin. “If you do not leave right now you and your entire families will be implicated!”

Right away, Mu Bang realized he said something wrong.

Not only were these bandits not scared away by the implications, but their smiles grew even wider, and their eyes shone with a mad joy that hinted at the pure evil that must lurk in their hearts.

“Hmpf!” The first bandit huffed in disdain, hurrying to cover his smile and crossing his arms imperiously as he raised his nose to look down at Mu Bang. “What Twin Heavens Sect? You have eyes but do not see Mt. Tai. Do you know who my ancestor is?”

“We, your daddies, don’t care about your background!” The second assumed the same pose, his nose practically pointed at the sky so great was his arrogance. “You better listen to us peacefully or you’re courting death!”

The two agents of chaos and despair held their arrogant poses for a long heartbeat, basking in the terror they inspired, before it collapsed, and they began cheering once more.

“Three. For. Three. Three. For. Three!” The first pumped his fists in excitement.

“New high score!” The second shouted, raising his hands in the air and looking at Mu Bang as if he was a great treasure.

Then they bandits began to dance.

A dance of EVIL!!

What else could it be based on the uncoordinated wiggling of hips and hands?

Truly, this must be some heretical ritual to imbibe these ne’er-do-wells with the power of their dark patron.

Knowing that diplomacy was no longer possible, the righteous guard Mu Gang could not stand this disrespect anymore and charged at the bandits with his saber drawn.

He was ready to fight to the death in the name of justice!

“Junior Disciple Mu Bang!” A fair voice called out. The princess was such a kind, gentle soul that she could not stand to see blood being shed. “They’re just children!”

Indeed, evil takes on a many a form.

The two bandits, eviler than almost all others, had taken on the form of two young boys, no older than six years old.

The first child’s long blond hair didn’t move in the wind even as Mu Bang rushed toward him. His green eyes tracked the cultivator attacking him.

Or maybe he couldn’t follow the blinding speed and just got lucky. Either way, it didn’t matter.

Perhaps heeding his princess’ kind nature, the righteous disciple Mu Bang turned his sword so he would only teach this evildoer a lesson.

A few broken bones would set them on the right path, certainly.

Unfortunately, though evil was small, it was not weak.

The second bandit’s fist planted on Mu Bang’s cheek before he could strike.

BANG!

The righteous knight went flying from the force of the blow, skidding along the dirt

and crashing into a tree on the side of the road.

The carriage and its guards looked at the bandit, his tiny fists planted on his hips heroically as he stared back, in shock.

“Don’t try and fight us.”

“We’re too awesome for that. So…”

““Give us treasure!””

If the righteous heroes and their benevolent princess wished to reach the far-off kingdom, they would need to prove themselves against the world’s many trials.

The first of which were two terrifying evil bandits shaped like little boys.

But what else should one expect out of the Jiraiya and Sarig Senju, eldest sons of Mikael?

Evil begets evil.

A tiger will not give birth to a dog.

And a monster will create more monsters.

Author's Note:

Well… I live!

Been quiet for a while, hard at work on my first original story. Volume 1 will probably be done around spring or early summer. Every once in a while, I need a break, and I write a few hundred words for something else. Some of which are Side Stories for RR. Once they reach a certain length, I might as well release them.

This is part one of… three or four parts? Something like that. So expect a few more releases in the coming weeks and one more on Valentine's day before I refocus down. (Unless my muse kicks my ass again, of course.)

Hope everyone's starting 2025 off right.

TWO TERRIBLE TWINS TRAVEL THROUGH TROUBLED TIMES II

‘Xiao Tian!’ The old war god shouted in excitement. ‘I can’t sense any cultivation in them.’

That shook the driver out of his surprise at the sight of a six year old boy knocking out a Spirit Building cultivator in one blow.

‘What sort of body lets a mortal child fight a Spirit Building Cultivator?’ Xiao Tian asked. That was a bit too domineering, wasn’t it? Were the heavens even fair? ‘Are you sure it isn’t a transformation technique?’

‘Look at their eyes!’

Xiao Tian did and, after a bit of focusing, noticed what his mentor had as well.

Both of the young boys’ eyes were a deep green and, ever so slightly, slited like a snake.

‘Dragons!’ Xiao Tian exclaimed internally.

A dragon’s entire body was a treasure. Their skin and bones could become weapons and armor, its blood could be used for pills and every organ was a delicious tonic that could increase one’s talent.

Basically, they were the dream of every cultivator.

‘Infant dragons that haven’t begun cultivating,’ the war god explained. ‘Or at least they have the bloodline of dragons. Their odd hair and eyes are probably caused by this.’

Which means that they were weak.

‘That doesn’t make sense,’ Xiao Tian argued. ‘Beasts need to cultivate before assuming human form.’

‘Not if their bloodline is strong enough,’ the war god lectured. ‘If both of the parents are already strong enough to have human forms, they can give birth to beasts with that form right away.’

‘Then…’ Xiao Tian hesitated, sensing a crisis. ‘Wouldn’t their parents come cause trouble?’

The clothes the pair wore, while odd, was in no way low quality. They weren’t holding any weapons or jewelry, but their chubby faces and strong bodies spoke of diligent and indulgent raising.

Even if he wanted to catch the treasures right in front of him, Xiao Tian needed to be able to live long enough to use it.

‘If they are around and know its you,’ the war god said. ‘These two are definitely not

from around here. Based on how they acted, they probably ran away from home to cause trouble. If you can get them before their family finds them, your Bloodline can wipe away all traces.'

Xiao Tian's eyes shone as he realized that the heavens were favoring him once again.

'For now, you need to make sure nobody else realized what they are,' the spirit cautioned. 'If you can leave without incidents, you can return alone and catch them.'

Xiao Tian understood immediately. If these two boys were discovered by the big sects, would there even be a drop of blood left for him?

All this was passed between master and student by spiritual transmission in a heartbeat.

Xiao Tian, watching Mu Bang spit out a mouthful of blood, decided he needed to do something quick.

The longer they remained here, the greater the chance someone would catch on.

"The day is short and the road is long," Xiao Tian said, hoping down from the carriage. The others looked at him in surprise, unsure what to do given the shocking strength of the 'children.' "I hope the two Young Masters can let us go and we can make it worth your while."

'What are you doing?' One of the other disciples sent to his ear quietly by voice transmission.

"What'u got?" The curly haired one asked casually, also putting his hands on his hips to imitate the other.

'To be able to beat Senior Brother Mu Bang so young, these two must not be simple,' Xiao Tian answered, sending his words to not only the disciple's ears, but to the others as well. 'They must be the two Young Masters of some sect out to experience the world. It is better not to antagonize such a force as we don't know if they have a hidden protector.'

Even if they did, Xiao Tian had confidence in his ability to find and kill them later with his Void God Bloodline.

After all, what were the odds that someone like Shuang Ai would be around them?

"We're only simple outer sect disciples on a short mission to Wulin," Xiao Tian said aloud and threw a storage ring to the blonde. "I hope this is enough for the Young Masters to let us go?"

The blond caught the ring and looked at it curiously.

Xiao Tian was even confident in fighting them right now. Mu Bang had been careless and the boy had taken him by surprise. They were strong, but if the other two disciples acted as one, plus Xiao Tian, they could take these two on.

If the other boy was as strong, they might be in a bit trouble but that was only if the

Young Miss Ling Mei, the Golden Core Cultivator, wasn't there with them.

'Listen to Junior Brother Xiao Tian,' Ling Mei ordered. 'Once we settle this, we can investigate them in Wulin.'

"A ring?" The curly one scowled and crossed his arms. The blond bit the piece of metal and also frowned. "We have a bunch of rings. Why would we want another ring? We want stuff! Yah, know…" The boy seemed to struggle to find the words, then shrugged. "Give us all your stuff!"

Xiao Tian blinked, not understanding.

Yes, it was only a side ring and not his main one, but it still had a enough spirit stones and herbs to be considered a fortune for outer sect disciple like him. It should be more than these two boys expected.

"We can't give this to mom," the blond finally shook his head and dropped the ring to the ground. "Her punches will hurt way more if she wears rings during training. Give us shiny stuff…"

"Or plants. Mom likes cool plants," the curly boy interjected. "She'll definitely forgive us if we get her flowers. You guys are from that sect, you have poisonous flowers right? Or maybe plants with teeth? Or medicine that is supper rare?"

It was Ling Mei who caught on first.

"You…" Her voice was as beautiful as ever, but the disbelieve in it robbed it of some of its elegance. "Don't know know what a storage ring is?"

"What's that, miss?" The blond asked, looking at the carriage with interest. "And why aren't you raising your legs like we told you? We're robbing you!"

"You!" One of the other disciples shouted, face red in shame and anger as he almost lunged at the boy.

Ling Mei, though, spoke before he could attack, her voice more exasperated than angry.

"Do you know what that means?"

""Of course."" Both six year olds answered as one, puffing their chest in pride.

"We read a lot," the curly one added, this time it was his nose pointed at the sky. "Raising your legs means walking out and giving us your money! So come out and give us stuff!"

"It's part of the second line Daddy told us to say when robbing people," the blond explained. "You guys are really cool! We got to use all three. Nobody else gave us the chance to brag about Daddy."

Xiao Tian didn't know if he should laugh or cry.

These two dragons sure were unique.

“How about I give you a bag of plants and you let us go,” Ling Mei said teasingly, a note of laughter in her voice.

Mu Bang spat out another mouthful of blood as he realized that the Young Miss wasn’t going to do anything against these ‘bandits’ and even found them funny.

Shame and humiliation filled his chest, but there was nothing he could do. It was his fault for being weak and careless.

“And medicine,” the blond said.

“Food too,” the curly one said in a hurry. When the blond looked at him, he just said one word. “Boss.”

“Yes, food.” The blond hurried to nod, his face slightly pale. “Definitely food or we won’t be able to go home.”

“Alright,” Ling Mei laughed lightly as she descended the carriage, quite charmed by these little ‘robbers.’

“”Woah.””

The two boys looked at the young miss with wide eyes as she approached and held out a small pouch. Less useful than spatial rings, Qian Kun pouches still held a lot more than they should. This could be considered a small trick on the little bandits who couldn’t understand that the ring on the ground was more valuable.

“So pretty,” the blond muttered. “Are you a Mom?”

Ling Mei stumbled and almost tripped at the sudden and rude question.

She didn’t answer before the other boy smacked the first on the back of the head.

“Don’t be dumb. She’s clearly not a Mom. She’s like Aunt Val, Aunt Em, or Aunt ‘Lyta.”

“I’m not dumb, if she’s not a Mom, then she’s also not an Aunt. That means she’s a threat. Mommy Artoria said all pretty women who aren’t Moms or Aunts are threats.” The blond pushed the other boy back. “You’re dumb.”

“Nuh uh. Mom said I was a genius.”

“Mommy Medea told me I was a genius.”

“I am.”

“No, I am.”

“Me.”

“Me.”

Within moments, the two young boys had dissolved into a childish argument over who was dumb and ended up wrestling on the ground, completely ignoring their ‘victims.’

Truly, even heroes fall victim to beauties… Cough cough… I mean villains.

Truly, even villains fall victim to beauties.

Unsure what to do in front the wrestling boys pulling each other's cheeks and hair, Ling Mei looked back at Xiao Tian for help.

The young man was almost ready to just leave them to it. The sooner they left, the sooner Xiao Tian could come back for these little treasure troves.

"May I ask your names," Ling Mei finally decided to interrupt the childish fight.

Both boys sprung to their feet instantly, their fight completely forgotten. Both were strong enough to break trees if they wanted and hadn't been damaged at all by a bit of wrestling.

"Right," the curly one nodded. "Its important to say your name when robbing. I am Sarig Senju, the older brother!"

"And I am Jiraiya Senju, the oldest brother!"

Even the introduction was almost enough to start another fight.

"We were born at the same time," Sarig growled at his brother.

"Nuh uh," Jiraiya shook his head strongly which sent his wild hair flying into his face, which he hurried to wipe off. "I'm older by a whole fifty eight seconds! Daddy said so."

"That's not even a minute!"

"That sounds like something the second born would say," Jiraiya said with a smug smile, uncaring by his brother's reddening face as he taunted. "Number 2."

"Rargh!"

As the pair returned to their wrestling, Mu Bang finally managed to return to his feet, head still ringing from the blow and with a fist print on his face.

"Then we shall take our leave Young Masters," Ling Mei finally said, deciding that as amusing as the boys were, they had been stopped long enough.

None of the other sect disciples looked please to just leave, but they didn't say anything, know that the Young Miss' words were law on this mission.

Sarig and Jiraiya kept fighting.

There was no loyalty among thieves.

Ling Mei left the bag in front of them but picked up the spatial ring and gave it back to Xiao Tian with a smile.

This children's tale could have ended here.

Though the heroes had been hurt and delayed, the villains had been outwitted and fallen into infighting, leaving our dear protagonists to go free.

Unfortunately, the perils facing our heroes were not over yet.

Right before Ling Mei could re-enter her carriage and continue her voyage, a sinister voice called out.

"There you are!"

An oppressive force exerted on the small section of road where the heroes had been waylayed, pushing all to the ground. The carriage was crushed and the blood-sweating horse turned to paste. Ling Mei, not yet in the vehicle, was able to keep her feet, though even the Golden Core Cultivator's back was bent. The others, even Xian Tian, were not so lucky and were crushed directly into the ground, unable to stand up.

"I heard the Twin Heavens Sect had a promising young genius, but Miss Ling Mei is also a beauty." The man who descended from the sky, radiating power, looked over the group appreciatively. "Tsk, tsk. Your sect sure is lucky to have you."

His robes were embroided in black and red, a skull without eyes proudly displayed. This was a demonic cultivator from the Peace Pavilion, no doubt here for no good.

One just had to look at his evil mustache to know his vile heart.

'A Profound Sky cultivator! One near the peak.' The war god warned, ignoring Mu Bang who spat out another mouthful of blood from being crushed like everyone else. 'You cannot fight him, you must escape!'

Unwillingness filled Xiao Tian's heart as his pride battled with his reason.

It was not that he had a grudge against whoever this was or even felt particularly loyal to Ling Mei and the Twin Heavens Sect, but being oppressed like this, unable to do anything due to differences in cultivation, was humiliating.

Greed for the two young dragons also held him firm.

"Ling Mei greets Senior," the young genius said through gritted teeth as she bowed her head, cupping her hands in respect. "May this one know what has attracted Senior's attention and how the Twin Heavens Sect can help?"

There was also the fact that Xiao Tian wouldn't be able to return to the Twin Heavens Sect without Ling Mei, who he was technically supposed to protect, even if he was 'only' a Foundation Laying cultivator.

"Hmm," the Profound Sky realm expert rubbed his evil mustache of evil… evily as he scanned her body from top to bottom. "I just heard my old friend had a wonderful daughter and decided to come invite you to tea at my pavilion to get to know the genius of the younger generation."

Without the Twin Heavens Sect, there would be no way Xiao Tian could get close to the Shuang Twins and the Long Island Sect.

"This Ling Mei would be glad to talk to Senior," the young lady, despite going a bit pale at the idea, maintained her respectful posture. "Unfortunately, this Ling Mei has been tasked by the Sect Master with a mission. Once it is finished, she will of course visit the Peace Pavilion."

'There's no way the Twin Heavens Sect would take this laying down,' the old war god

urged his disciple. ‘The demonic sects are trying to start a war. You must flee. Do not be-‘

Before Xiao Tian could come to a decision, or even begin channeling his bloodline to disappear, a slightly squeaky voice shouted.

“HEY YOU!” Sarig Senju, covered in dirt from wrestling his brother, pointed his finger angrily at the flying demonic cultivator. “You can’t rob them! We’re robbing them!”

“Yeah!” Jiraiya agreed. “Only we can rob pretty women!”

(At this point in our children’s book, it should be noted that cultivators, as a rule of thumb, didn’t even consider mortals to be the same type of creatures as them.

Even those from the righteous sects wouldn’t care if they accidentally destroyed a city of millions in a fight. The only difference between the righteous and demonic factions were in their cultivation methods.

This led to certain internal cultural differences in how they treated mortals.

Righteous, or more accurately orthodox, sects simply didn’t care about them. Demonic, or more accurately unorthodox, sects would use mortals as materials for cultivation resources, just as all cultivators used beasts.

There were exceptions, of course. Some, like the lovely princess of our story Ling Mei, were kinder than most. Others were extra evil, like our mustache twirling villain.

But those two were the predominant cultures of the cultivation world.

So, when a mortal blocks the way of cultivators, righteous or demonic, they are often simply killed. No attention paid to jobs that went unfinished without workers, the families that lost loved ones or the children who would starve without parents.

When these mortals went so far as to shout and point at a Profound Sky Sect Elder?

It was like being slapped in the face by a fly.

Then the fly shat in your food, slept with your mother, and shaved your dog bald.

Truly, it was hard to tell who was more evil between the old man and the two boys… I mean… two bandits.)

With narrowed eyes, the demonic cultivator turned from Ling Mei looked at these two ‘mortals’ for the first time.

Despite his spell, they were unbowed under the pressure he was using to cover the area and block the signals.

More than that, they seemed wholly unaffected as they glared up at him.

Special physiques, perhaps? If so, he’d turn them into living pills for angering him.

Then he noticed.

Incomparable to even the old war god’s fingernail in his prime, the demonic cultivator was still a Profound Sky expert and could notice the faint slitting of their eyes.

For a moment, he considered that they were transformed beasts, but that wouldn’t

explain their lack of cultivation and still being able to stand his pressure.

Unless?

"…Dragons?"

The word was muttered under his breath in shock as he looked at the boys in a new light.

Everyone heard it though.

"Yeah," Sarig yelled back. "So hands off our stuff or we'll beat you up!"

All eyes locked onto the children, the Twin Heavens Sect disciples openly gaping the 'bandit Young Masters' who had accosted them.

Greed overtook the demonic cultivator but he was not rookie. He knew that safety was best, even in front of these two small treasures.

Thankfully, the pair didn't seem that smart, based on how they were acting despite their weakness.

"I hadn't realized you were amazing dragons," the demonic cultivator said, all smiles now as he cupped his hands in respect. "I'm sorry for trying to interfere. How about I make it up to you? Where are your parents? I'd like to tell them what splendid sons they have."

"Yeah we're awesome," Jiraiya puffed out his chest in pride. "You can't tell our Mom though. She'll beat us up in training if she learns we snuck out again. If you want to make it up to us, you don't have to do much. Just give us all your treasure… and food. We gotta make sure Boss doesn't tattle."

"Wonderful," the sect elder said, practically vibrating in joy. "Then why don't you and Young Miss Ling Mei come with me? I have plenty of food."

"No way!" Sarig said, crossing his arms. "Daddy said if a creepy old man tells us to go somewhere with him, we should kick him in between the legs as hard as we can and steal his wallet! Then we take his body to-"

"WAIT!" Jiraiya suddenly shouted, even as everyone stared at the curly haired boy in horror. The blond's eyes, however, were only for Ling Mei. "Pretty Threat… You are a Young Miss?"

Ling Mei, seeing an opportunity for survival here, hurried to speak before the demonic cultivator could interrupt.

"Yes, I am the daughter of the Second Elder of the Twin Heaven's Sect. If you can tell call your fami-"

Despite her mouth continuing to move, no sound escaped as the demonic sect elder cast another spell.

Neither boy noticed though.

“Little Bro!” Jiraiya pulled his brother’s sleeve to get his attention, his eyes shinning with excitement and joy.

“Who are you calling little!” Sarig fumed, but the first born didn’t even bother repelling. He just said a simple sentence that dispersed the younger boy’s anger in a heartbeat.

“Young Miss is what they call Princesses here!”

Sarig, about to get into another wrestling match, suddenly stopped. His eyes also went wide.

“…Really? You’re not lying like that time you said Boss was behind me when we stole cupcakes are you?”

“No way!” Jiraiya said, practically vibrating in place. “Mommy Ichi was complaining to Mom the yesterday day about form… forma… about rules and stuff here. She said Young Misses were just like all the other clan princesses she knew.”

“A Princess…” Sarig said, now looking at Ling Mei in awe.

Ling Mei had given up subtlety as was desperately trying to get the boys to call their family by use of hand gestures.

“Hey you!” Jiraiya suddenly said, pointing at the old cultivator. “That’s our Princess! You can’t have her.”

Mo Xi, a venerable cultivator in the Profound Sky realm and Elder of the Peace Pavilion, was being careful. The entire time the boys had been conferring, he’d been scanning the area. Even if these two dragons thought they had snuck away from home, it wasn’t rare for powerful families to assign secret protectors to their children without them being aware.

It would be a tragedy if there was a Nascent Soul, or worse, hiding nearby.

Yet, even caution had its limits.

Not only had he not discovered anything, but the old cultivator had been insulted and pointed at again.

If he let this stand, would he still have face left?

“You’re courting death child.” Mo Xi’s began to twitch.

“No. Daddy is.”

Fully giving up the pretense of a kind elder, Mo Xi decided speed was his best bet at the moment and swept his hand in a grand gesture.

He intended for this one move to be enough to not only crush the extraneous Twin Heavens sect disciples so they couldn’t report anything, but also to capture Ling Mei and the little boys.

There was only one small problem with his plan and it wasn’t the bandits’ ‘hidden

protector.'

See, despite being only six years old, these two boys were still dragons.

Specifically, they were the eldest sons of Tsunade Senju and Mikael.

While they were nowhere near the strength of their parents yet and the cultivation world was a deep ocean filled with monsters, a Profound Sky cultivator wasn't the oppressive force Mo Xi thought it was, limited as he was to a small corner of a small continent in a small world in a small universe.

So, when Mo Xi swept his hand to hurry and finish things as quickly as possible, lest he be caught this close to the Twin Heavens sect or by wandering dragons, he didn't even consider the fact that resistance was possible.

After all, these were just children to the centuries old cultivator, who had a much higher realm.

Only… nothing happened.

There was a beat of silence as the disciples of the Twin Heavens sect waited for death, yet it never came.

"You just tried to take our Princess, didn't you!" Sarig shouted, not in question, but in accusation.

"He did!" Jiraiya nodded fiercely, suddenly right beside Ling Mei.

He barely came up to her thigh.

"Rargh!" Sarig launched himself into the sky with a scream of primal (squeaky) rage, jettisoning himself toward Mo Xi.

Unsure what had just happened, but assuming the pair had some sort of defensive treasures, Mo Xi hurried to extend his full power to try and smack the boy from the sky.

Even if the young dragon died, it would only be a small loss. The body was valuable enough on its own.

The boy wasn't traveling fast, like a Profound Sky cultivator, but had just jumped with the force of, perhaps, an initial Golden Core realm.

Only… nothing happened again.

Sarig crashed into Mo Xi's chest head first.

The demonic cultivator, right before he was hit, felt his power fluctuate around his body.

BANG!

Both fell from the sky and crashed into the ground.

Sarig landed beside his brother, his soft, curly hair not even ruffled by the impact.

Mo Xi crashed into the forest, his body breaking through three trees before finally coming to a stop.

“Blegh!” Sarig said in the direction of the fallen cultivator, sticking out his tongue after high-fiving his brother.

Mo Xi spent a moment trying to understand what had just happened.

The boy had been strong for a ‘mortal,’ equal to an early stage Golden Core, but it was the weakness right before the impact that had ensured Mo Xi had lost this exchange. What had caused it?

In a world where the strength of cultivation was paramount, nobody really knew how to prepare for when a fight wasn’t decided on brute force, or at least they were unprepared for a battle of ‘concepts’ at this low a level.

Perhaps if Mo Xi had transcended the Nascent Soul realm and achieved the fabled Dao Hall stage, coming into contact with a Dao to study, he might have gotten a basic sense of what just happened.

It didn’t matter how strong was, if one wasn’t exposed to a wide range of ideas, one would simply lack the context to understand when the ‘rules’ of the world changed.

So Mo Xi had no way of knowing that his power had simply ceased to exist for a moment while his attempt to use it only empowered the attack coming his way.

Had he arrived earlier, he might have had a clue.

Why was it that when the two boys were fighting, there was no damage to the road?

Why, with the strength equivalent to a Golden Core, had the wrestling of the two brothers looked just like the actions of mortal boys their age?

Was it because Tsunade Senju, their mother, was famed for her control and passed it onto her sons?

Impossible.

Anyone knows that little boys, no matter their training, have zero control without a history of abuse that Mikael and Tsunade would never allow?

So why had the pair been as week as six year olds on moment and strong enough to hurt Mo Xi the next?

Why had Mikael and the Family let these two boys ‘sneak out’ in the first place?

Mo Xi couldn’t know this, but he did know that even with that weird weakening of his Qi, he hadn’t been really injured and the dragon had not been faster than him.

Which meant he could win.

From the forest where he’d fallen, Mo Xi rose to his feet and dashed back toward the road.

In less than a heartbeat, the demonic cultivator appeared behind Jiraiya like a ghost, blade set to decapitate both children in one move. He wouldn’t give them a chance to use whatever technique it was again.

But it wasn't a technique.

Jiraiya and Sarig Senju were, surprisingly, not Life Dragons like their parents.

Their Elements, instead, could be said to be the two halves of what makes 'Life'.

So, when the spiritual blade, a treasure from a hidden realm, fell upon Jiraiya's neck no blood flowed.

Instead the blade rusted over and disintegrated as if it had spent countless years without use or upkeep.

A weapon of War could never hurt a Dragon of Peace.

Sarig, surprised by the appearance of the 'Princess Thief,' quickly launched himself at Mo Xi once more.

Despite his shock at loosing his treasured weapon, Mo Xi had been ready to retreat at a moment's notice.

Only… his Qi was sluggish to respond, his mind was slow, and he nearly tripped over his own feat as he turned.

A man at Peace is never prepared for a Dragon of War.

Sarig's foot landed squarely in the old man's groin.

The scream was heard for miles.

If one were to say that the eldest children of Mikael were weak, one wouldn't be wrong. They were barely Tier 4 as the Family didn't want to give too much power to children until they matured more.

Yet, despite being children, one also wouldn't be wrong to call them strong.

When the Dragon of Peace and the Dragon of War worked together, even if they couldn't beat someone, they would never lose to anyone under Tier 7… or Dao Hall stage, as this world would call it.

Truly, evil was a strong and omnipresent force, taking the most unexpected of shapes.

Ling Mei, who had watched this entire scenario from start to end and been able to follow along, still couldn't believe her eyes at seeing a venerable Profound Sky Elder rolling on the ground screaming in pain.

Not only for the fact he had 'lost' to children so decisively, but because… Well, the pain shouldn't be that bad, comparatively.

Certainly, getting hit there would hurt, and it was generally considered uncouth to do so, but cultivators regularly dealt with pain much worse.

Whether it was broken bones from fights, poisonous concoctions, rampant Qi, or even just day to day pain of opening meridians at the Foundation Laying realm, it should all be worse than a kick to the groin. There were even some cultivation methods where castration was the barrier to entry.

Yet here was a demonic sect Elder screaming like he was a mortal who'd never been in a fight before suddenly losing his… manhood.

Sarig kicked him again.

"W.h…y" Mo Xi rasped, tears streaming down his face at the pain.

"Daddy said if someone touches themselves between the legs near us, we should kick there," Jiraiya answered 'helpfully' with a cheerful, boyish smile on his face.

Then he also kicked Mo Xi in the groin.Mo Xi spat a mouthful of blood and passed out in anger and pain.

Author's Note:

Part 2 of this little chain of side stories. I think I have about 2 more coming in the next few weeks. Then one more of a lewd bent for Valentines.

There has been some confusion as to what these SS are in relation to the main story. I still consider Rapturous Rhapsody, Mikael's story, to be complete. I have no intention of continuing it regularly as I don't consider Mikael as having anywhere else to go as a character.

That being said, I do have ideas for mini-stories regarding the Family in various worlds. I write these ideas whenever I face a blank page in my upcoming original work. Whenever they are complete, I'll release them for you guys to read. These will be infrequent and inconsistent. Mikael will show up in a few of them (and it should be expected he is always in the background for reasons that are obvious to anyone who finished RR) but he will largely be secondary at best.

Another thing to note is that these Side Stories will bounce around in both location and timelines. This one, for example, is about six years after the end of the fic. Others will be farther in the future or closer to the end. A reminder that Side Stories are canon, Omakes are not. Think of any of them as a happy surprise, rather than something to count on every week like I used to do since my main focus is still on my upcoming work.

I think that covers most things. I will see you all next time.

TWO TERRIBLE TWINS TRAVEL THROUGH TROUBLED TIMES III

‘What… just happened?’ Xiao Tian asked his teacher, trying to make sense of the last minute of his life.

He hadn’t even had time to use his bloodline’s first level feature to flee before a Profound Sky realm expert was beaten by a pair of children.

‘That child, Sarig, has touched upon the Dao of War,’ the old war god said gravely. ‘I… can’t tell how much, but it is no less than my own attainments.’

‘A Dao! Is he-?’

‘No.’ Wang Xiang cut off his pupil. ‘He still hasn’t cultivated.’

‘That isn’t possible.’

‘It shouldn’t be possible,’ the teacher corrected. ‘One needs their Nascent Soul to even be able to feel Dao, let alone understand it. Yet it is his brother that frightens me.’

‘Master!?’

‘Jiraiya Senju completely suppressed my own Dao.’ It was a frightening thing for the old war god. His Dao was all that was keeping his soul anchored to this world. ‘If he had used it for more than a moment, I would have disappeared for good.’

Murderous impulse sired within Xiao Tian.

He refused to lose his teacher after he already lost everyone else in his life.

‘Do not!’ Wang Xiang ordered instantly. ‘You are not their match. No one under the Dao Hall realm is. You will be as helpless as that demonic sect elder, even if you surprise them.’

‘But-‘

‘But nothing. Take from this a lesson. There is always a taller mountain. There is always a greater talent.’

Xiao Tian felt bitterness well up at the words. Reluctance when confronted by the truth of them.

He, with his Bloodline and heaven defying luck, had risen too quickly.

Less than a year ago, he’d been a mortal and now he was a Spirit Building realm cultivator, an unheard of feat. He’d nursed within his heart an arrogance that had gone unchecked all this time.

Were those who were stronger than him? Certainly, but Xiao Tian had always believed it was solely due to the advantage in time and recourses they had over him. His

talent and dedication would make it so that, eventually, he'd be the one standing on top.

Even if he started the race late, he'd finish first.

Yet now…

'This is a blessing,' Wang Xiang sensed the fluctuations in his disciple's soul and directed his mind in another direction. 'Without this demon sect elder, we would have tried to attack them ourselves. Even if the heavens themselves descended to help us escape, we would not be able hide from a Dao Hall cultivator, even with your bloodline. Even the weakest has unfathomable means. And whatever faction these dragons are from are certainly not weak.'

That did make Xiao Tian feel slightly better. If nothing else, his luck held strong.

The aforementioned dragons were, during this discussion, engaging in the second greatest tradition of fighting.

Looting!

(It should be noted that the third greatest tradition of fighting is the silent respect held between worthy foes.

The greatest tradition of a fight is, without a doubt, the trash talk.

This list was, of course, made by Mikael and posted over the entrance to the training yard so every child saw it before and after their daily practice.)

"Why is he so poor?" Sarig complained, holding up the robe that was too big for him and trying to find pockets he had missed.

"Because he was weak?" Jiraiya guessed with a shrug, still standing next to Ling Mei.

"That can't be right," Sarig disagreed. "Daddy said weak bandits don't last long and this guy's really old."

"Young Masters," Ling Mei, who had remained quiet until now decided to take a chance to escape these terrifying little boys. "Perhaps this one might be able to help? This one suspects Mo Xi has quite a bit of wealth."

"Yeah?" Sarig asked eagerly. "Where is it?"

"If this one is able to find enough treasure to satisfy the Young Masters, would you permit this one and her Junior Disciples to return to their mission with our own meager possessions?"

Ling Mei, though she was acting very humble in front of the little dragons, actually had a pretty descent impression of the two boys. They were terrifyingly strong for their age but, despite that, they hadn't really hurt her or he companions when they had the chance.

(Mu Bang's injuries were ignored as minor wounds taken from a senior cultivator teaching a junior their place.

What a sad world this was for those without power.)

Jiraiya and Sarig had even defended them from an ambush from a demonic sect elder. If not for them being here, Ling Mei shuddered to think what would have happened to her.

So, if she could convince them to let her leave without further issues, this would be a profit within disaster. Now, how to convince them that she didn't-

"Ok.""Sure."

… Never mind.

"Then allow this one."

Still accompanied by Jiraiya, Ling Mei approached the old cultivator.

Averting her eyes so she didn't have to see his wrinkled nude form, the darling of the Twin Heavens sect retrieved the plain ring from the small pile of looted goods.

Normally it would be impossible for a Golden Core cultivator to break the spirit seal on a Profound Sky cultivator's storage ring but since the man was unconscious, he could not resist.

In less than a minute, Ling Mei had removed everything of value from the ring, pilling it up on the road.

Dozens of mystical and esoteric weapons. Piles of raw materials, each rarer than the last. Hundreds of refined pills of all sorts. A small mountain of High Grade Spirit Stones.

The most precious contents were the handful of precious plants and fruits that even gave Ling Mei a flicker of greed at the sight.

That was a thousand year old Ginseng! And Bloodbark Willow Fruit! And there was a Beastmarrow Pellet!

Not even her father, the Second Elder of the greatest sect in the province was this wealthy.

So why did those boys look disappointed?

"So, it's like a bottomless box," Jiraiya looked at the ring with more interest than the treasures. "Are the others like that?"

"Where is the rest?" Sarig asked, looking at Ling Mei suspiciously.

"This- This one has emptied it completely," Ling Mei hurried to answer, her heart skipping a beat. "This is everything and not even a petal is left."

"Hmmm." Sarig said suspiciously.

"Aha!" Jiraiya cried out in triumph, holding up the ring to his brother.

Then he wilted.

"Darn it!"

"What?"

"This thing works on Aura," Jiraiya explained. "If you poke it with a bit of it, you can

see inside. But its so small. There's not even enough room for Andromeda!"

Sarig pouted but eventually sighed and patted Ling Mei on the lower back. (The highest he could reach on her.)

"Sorry for not believing you Princess," he said consolingly. "I guess he really was poor. Thanks for trying to help though."

Ling Mei didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"With everything else it… might be enough?" Jiraiya said hesitantly. "Maybe the Boss hasn't tried some of this stuff? Anything new counts as double, right?" There was a note of hope in his voice, but it was small.

"Right," Sarig sighed again.

One would be forgiven for having pity on these two little boys who looked like they were going to cry… If one forgot they were looking at enough treasure to found a small sect and considering it poor.

Such was the nature of evil, unable to be satisfied.

"Does this not satisfy the Young Masters?" Ling Mei asked with a bow. "If so, this one can provide more should we arrive in Wulin, in thanks for your aid."

"Nah," Jiraiya joined his brother on patting Ling Mei on the back consolingly, looking up at her kindly. "Daddy said we should always keep our promises so, even though the baddie was poor, we won't rob you anymore."

Ling Mei's eye twitched, but she swallowed the retort in her heart.

Why were these boys so close to her!? And touching her!

Didn't their parents teach them about decorum!?

Instead she just bowed again.

"Many thanks to the Young Masters. Will this one have-"

Whatever Ling Mei was going to ask was cut off by another voice.

"There you are!"

The disciples of the Twin Heavens sect felt their heart fall at the familiar call out.

Only… That voice was surprisingly squeaky for a demonic cultivator, wasn't it?

Barely had the voice called out that the sky darkened.

Ling Mei, with dread in her heart, looked up to see a terrifying sight.

A red… beast of some sort flew above them.

An enormous monstrosity larger than the greatest pavilion. Its skull was shaped like a dragon and it was covered in scales but that was where the similarities ended. A long sinuous neck connected to a thick body. It's arms were large leathery wings and its legs were thick before ending in three sharp talons. Great spikes ran from its horned head, along its back, and down a long pointed tail.

‘What sort of beast is that?’ Xiao Tian asked his teacher, almost in awe at the elegant yet brutal form. And its size!

‘I… do not know.’ Wang Xiang faltered slightly. ‘A dragon-bird of some sort? Look at the base of its neck!’

It was only thanks to his cultivation that Xiao Tian was able to notice the small form nestled between two spikes.

A… little girl?

“Jiraiya! Sarig!” She called down.

“Olivia! Andromeda!” Jiraiya called out, waiving up at the girl. “Check it out! We’re bandits!”

He said it with such innocent joy that one could forget that he was speaking as an agent of evil.

Unfortunately, even chaos gremlins have fears and both brothers paled as their younger sister yelled back the most dreaded words in their Family.

“You’re gonna be late for dinner!”

A beat of silence.

““Shit!””

Sarig and Jiraiya moved fast, grabbing handfuls of their loot and shoving it quickly into fist sized boxed that hung from their belts.

“Hurry hurry hurry.”

“Get the food first!” Jiraiya told his younger brother. “If we can get it and get home befo-“

“Mrow.”

Both boys froze.

It was here!

The one they fear!

“”Boss!”” The twins greeted, pale faced and sweating.

Ling Mei, already looking toward the sky and the red beast, had seen the other three approaching from the distant skies at terrifying speed.

It was with despair that Ling Mei realized the one carrying the girl was the smallest of the four.

The largest, a good twenty percent larger than the others, was the source of the sound that froze the bandits in place.

…No. It wasn’t the massive beast.

It wasn’t even the little girl, barely older than four, that trundled down the creature’s neck as it lowered its head near the ground.

The sound had come from the fat cat in the little girls arms.

“Mrow!”

The sound was distinctly displeased as the tubby creature rose from the small child’s arms on tiny wings.

It flapped toward the little boys, a displeased rumbling coming from its thoat.

“”Sorry Boss.”” Jiraiya and Sarig both lowered their heads at the chastisement.

“We lost track of time robbing people,” Sarig tried to defend themselves sheepishly.

“Mom said the food’s getting cold. She made Aunt Circe’s Kykeon.”

The little girl looked like she was ready to cry at the thought, which seemed to incense the chubby cat more.

“MROW!”

“”Sorry Ismene.””

Both boys knew how much their littlest sister loved Mommy Medea’s Kykeon and nobody, not even the Boss, liked seeing the baby of the Family sad.

They were in deep trouble.

The Family only had one absolute rule: No matter how busy one was, everybody was to be back for dinner together.

They were in for a chewing out when they got home.

Yet even in the darkest of nights, there is light.

“I forgive you.” The smile on Ismene’s face was positively angelic, her cheeks laden with baby fat dimpling as her little hands gave her older brother gentle ‘pat pats’ on their head.

Now both boys looked like they were ready to cry as well.

The tubby feline did not look so forgiving though, the rumbling coming from its tummy exacerbating its displeasure at having its meal delayed.

All four of the great red beasts shifted slightly further away from the cat and the children all flinched.

Olivia, since her little sister had already forgiven them, decided to give her older brothers a lifeline.

“Did you get any good stuff?” She said, looking suggestively at the pile of treasures.

“We did. We did.” Let it not be said that Mikael’s oldest was unable to recognize an opportunity when given, even if he wasn’t a Dragon of Knowledge like Olivia.

“Mrow?”

Both Sarig and Jiraiya hurried to empty their bottomless boxes on the ground.

Items and treasures began pouring from the small boxes as if flowing from a river.

Ling Mei lost all decorum as her mouth gaped and her eyes nearly popped out of her

head as the more wealth than she could imagined poured forth.

No wonder they thought Mo Xi was poor! Did these boy rob a dozen sects or something?!

Suddenly, Ling Mei realized a horrifying implication.

If they didn't understand how to use storage rings, then all this loot was simply what was loose.

Forget sects, they must have looted an entire province!

And all before dinner?!

Ling Mei felt feint.

"We got stuff for everyone," Sarig said, pointing at enough jade manuals to fill an imperial library. "These are books… I think? Anyway, Mommy Robin will like them." Olivia's eyes shone with childish greed. "These are medicines for Mom. Some weapons for Daddy and Mommy Diana. Some clothes and toys for you and Mommy Medea." Ismene's face lit up with joy and she clapped with a childish squeal of delight. "And food for you Boss!"

The 'food' the little boy pointed at was… a mixed pile. Some of it was understandable, like a small mountain of bloody corpses of various beasts and an assortment of mystical plants.

Some of it was… less understandable.

Why was the treasure trove of spiritual stones counted among the food?

"Mrow."

The cat sniffed haughtily, its tiny wings carrying its floofy magnificence closer.

Faster than Ling Mei could follow, a round paw reached into the pile of bodies and withdrew a heart, still covered in fresh blood. A heart as big as the cat itself.

Everyone present seemed to hold their breath as small, pink, sandpaper-like tongue licked the heart once.

The cat paused as if in consideration. Its tiny wings flapped quickly to keep it hovering in place, as its tongue poked out of its mouth, like Daddy did when he was concentrating really hard.

With a dismissive "Mrow," the fat feline threw the heart over its shoulder.

Hengeron II's long neck darted forward, swallowing the heart in a happy gulp.

That seemed to be a signal for the other three drakes, as all four descended on the pile of bodies like a flock of crows, their draconic heads descending to take a big mouthful of meat before backing away to let the others get a bite.

In only a few seconds, under the horrified eyes of the sect disciples, the mountain of beast corpses become naught but bloody remains.

While her followers fed themselves, Medea the Boss Cat moved over to the rest of the food pile.

Jiraiya and Sarig clenched their fists.

This was it.

If the Boss liked what they got enough, she'd help them sneak out again.

If not, then she'd tattle on them whenever they tried until they pleased her.

Nobody got on or off the Island without the Boss' knowledge.

Medea landed on the mountain of spirit stones, batted one around with her little paw, and knocked another tumbling from the pile.

It was drawing it's decision out to tease the boys, Ling Mei realized. This… beast, despite not being in human form or speaking the human language, was just as smart as everyone here.

And, if the those terrifying dragon children called this thing 'Boss,' Ling Mei could only shudder in horror to imagine its power.

Finally, the cat opened its mouth to deliver its verdict.

"Mrow."

"Yes!"

"Woohoo."

"Good job!"

Unlike her sister, who celebrated their older brothers' achievement by cheering with them, Olivia just clapped lightly.

Then she ruined their fun.

"We are officially late for dinner."

""Crap!""

"Bad word!" Ismene immediately gasped and pointed at her brothers in accusation.

"Sorry," Sarig said without any repentance, shoving the stuff back into his box as he shot a look to his older brother. "I'll grab the stuff. You grab her."

A bad feeling arose in the sect disciples.

"Wha-" Ling Mei didn't even have time to ask her question before Jiraiya had grabbed her, thrown her over his shoulder, and jumped onto Cassandra's scaly neck.

For some reason, no matter what she tried, Ling Mei couldn't escape his grasp.

"This one doesn't understand!" She called out. "You said you wouldn't rob us?"

"We're not going to rob you," the blond 'reassured' her with a kind smile. "This is a kidnapping."

Dumbfounded by the shamelessness of the statement, Ling Mei stuttered in a most unladylike fashion at the rogue's audacity.

Thankfully, someone here had some morals-

“Kidnapping is wrong,” Ismene declared with a fierce glare (adorable pout) at her older brother as she placed her hands on her hips.

“She’s a Princess.”

“Oh.” Ismene blinked, both her and Olivia looking at Ling Mei in a new light. “That’s okay then.”

-…unfortunately, ‘some morals’ wasn’t saying much. She was still Mikael and Medea’s daughter.

“This one is not a Princess.” Ling Mei, seeing no rescue coming, hurried to explain. “This one has no relation to the Imperial Court. This one is simply the daughter of a Sect Elder. Not even the Sect Master.”

“Do you think we are bad people?” Olivia asked Ling Mei with a frown and the Young Miss didn’t know what to say for a moment. Thankfully, Nico Robin’s daughter was more than happy to explain her thoughts. “It’s wrong to judge others because they aren’t as lucky as us. Just because you are a poor Princess doesn’t mean we’ll look down on you.”

Ling Mei gaped at the girl.

On the one hand, that was a very admirable stance to take. Especially for one as privileged as Nico Olivia, Mikael’s eldest daughter. Forget a silver or gold spoon, being a child of Existence was being born with a divinely crafted mythril spoon. To have some sort of guiding principles this young, despite her separation from day to day life, spoke to a moral code, despite only being five years old.

On the other hand…

Ling Mei was still being kidnapped!

“All done!” Sarig called, jumping on Llamrei II’s head. “Go! Go! Go!”

Ismene, who had already retaken her place on Hengeron II’s neck, held out her hands and Medea landed in her arms with a tiny cat burp.

Ling Mei turned her head to see the road was completely clear of anything except a few splotches of blood and her Junior Brothers, who watched the occurrence silently with wide eyes, helpless to do anything in face of beings capable of defeating Sky Striding cultivator.

The Young Miss’ heart froze.

Where was Mo Xi’s unconscious body?

Medea the Floofiest Boss Cat stuck her tongue out in a little blep as she opened a grey door in the sky toward the Island, one large enough for all four drakes to fly through.

The last thing Xiao Tian heard before everyone disappeared was Jiraiya Senju’s voice yelling loud enough to hear.

“Daddy look! We kidnapped our first princess!”

Then the sky was clear.

…

“Should… Should we tell the sect?” Mu Bang asked hesitantly, blood dribbling from his lips.

Nobody had an answer.

How were they supposed to return to the sect when their Young Miss, the darling of the Second Elder and chosen disciple of the Sect Master, who they were supposed to protect, had been taken?

Wasn’t that just asking for death?

And what were they supposed to say?

‘Help! My Senior Sister, the Sect Princess, was kidnapped by Dragons!… But they were children!’

…That sounded like a children’s tale, did it not?

Or perhaps, looking at it from another’s perspective it could be called something like this:

‘Kidnapping Princesses 101: How I met your mother.’

Author's Note:

Part 3 of this little chain of Side Stories was done early so I decided to release it early. One more part before the end.

I've received a lot of feedback about how these little SS. Some of it good, some of it bad. Understandable, since not everyone is familiar with Xuanhuan/Wuxia tropes and these are pretty heavily based on them, which is very different from base Rapturous Rhapsody. On top of that, I've received a lot of complaints about releasing these on the main RR story instead of starting a new thread/story for these side stories.

Despite it being understandable, I believe I will stick to what I am doing going forward. If you do not like these SS, they do not in any way detract from RR and can be skipped if you wish. Maybe future Side Stories will be more your taste. I can't please everyone. As for creating a new thread/fic for these stories, I probably will do so in the future if they continue to grow in number, but these are pretty much only written in my downtime between other works so they won't be regular releases.

Just think of these as a pleasant surprise that might pop up and you are free to ignore if they are not to your taste.

That's about it for now and I'll see you all next time.

PS: A fan of mine over on AO3 created an AI song based the second omake I created for Rapturous Rhapsody. It uses the lyrics I used (Scream from Final Fantasy 14) but the vibe is very different. Since it's not monetized, not stealing someone's work, and, as far as I am aware, falling under fair use, you can go check it out if you like. While I do think we need to protect artists of all sorts from AI theft, I am also of the opinion that AI should not be ignored as a tool for creative use as well. Even if you are using AI to make a song based on a shitty fanfiction, it can still be a valid creative expression so long as it is done respectfully. My readers have done some really wonderful things with it and I am always humbled by your engagement with my work.

Check out Rapturous Rhapsody, and AI metal song, by Madmankentmorgan1:

https://suno.com/song/96621e3d-744e-42d1-809c-823bc0acbc63

TWO TERRIBLE TWINS TRAVEL THROUGH TROUBLED TIMES IV

“Daddy look! We kidnapped our first princess!”

Those were the words that sealed Ling Mei’s fate…

“You boys are in so much trouble.”

…Not that she heard them.

““But moooom.””

No sooner had she passed through the grey portal than she began to choke on air.

“No buts. Sit down. We’ll discuss your punishment after dinner.”

More specifically, Ling Mei was choking on the Qi in the air.

““…Yes mom.””

It was so… thick. Thick enough it covered her vision like fog and filled her throat like water.

“And you two! Why did you help them kidnap someone? You should know better than that.”

This was a Holy Land the likes of which didn’t even exist in stories.

“She’s a Princess! Daddy says we need to kidnap every princess we can if we want to get married in the future.”

Forget twice the result for half the effort, cultivating here would be a hundred times more effective than anywhere else.

“Daddy said that’s how he met you and the other Mommies!”

Just staying here passively would turn any cultivator into a Profound Sky expert in five- No! Three years!

“…Your father and I will be having a long talk later. For now, hand her over. Something’s clearly wrong with her.”

Only if they could survive though.

“Don’t bother. I recognize her. She can sit next to me. Right now, she needs to process the Qi in the air, or she’ll explode.”

Ling Mei’s eyes were closed, and she didn’t hear a word. She was completely oblivious to the world around her.

“AH! Don’t let her explode Aunty Em!”

The genius of the Twin Heavens Sect was desperately circling her cultivation technique, trying to process Qi faster than it could accumulate.

“She’ll be fine once she eats something.”

And she was failing.

“Phew. That’s good. She shouldn’t die just because she’s a weak poor princess.”

It wasn’t even a slow process. More and more Qi poured into her from her meridians, filling her Golden Core to bursting.

“…One of those cultivators? Is that where you ran off to?”

Desperately, Ling Mei cycled and cycled, but her dantian continued to swell to a painful level.

“We were bandits! We got a bunch of presents for everyone.”

If this continued, she’d die.

“We have plants, and books, and medicine, and clothes, and please don’t be mad.”

…There was a solution, but one that would be just as painful than death. Or even worse.

“…We’ll talk about it later. For now, go sit down. You two as well.”

It would be a betrayal of her father, her sect, her struggles, and would potentially doom her to a fate worse than death.

“”Yes mom.”” “”Yes, Mommy Tsu.””

With a decisive will, Ling Mei directed her Qi to shatter her meridians, making her a cripple for life.

…

It didn’t work! Ling Mei found she couldn’t control her Qi at all!

“…Why did he allow this?”

It was like trying to direct a leaf to the center of a hurricane, only to be blown away in every direction the wind willed.

“They were safe, got a lot of material, and will also learn that actions can have consequences.”

No. It was closer to a river trying to direct the sea. Her minuscule power was simply another drop of water in the current.

“And because he found it funny.”

There was an irony there that Ling Mei would never be able to appreciate.

A cultivator was the ultimate selfish being. They seized the power of the world for their own, uncaring of the results. Now, a woman dying of thirst was surrounded by water and it was drowning her.

“That as well. But there was a real goal. He doesn’t want them to be trapped on the Island. They need to experience the world beyond the Family.”

Ling Mei had a sudden epiphany there, as the pain mounted. A moment of clarity and

Insight at the boundary of life and death.

"… I know. But unlike him, I'm not omniscient."

This place, this Qi, this WORLD… It was Alive.

"He knows that and tries to limit himself as well. But it wasn't just for them. He also wants you to be ready when they need to leave for real. And your reaction wouldn't have been genuine if he told you."

Alive and aware. Powerful beyond all reckoning, beyond the greatest cultivator she had ever heard of, but it was not passive.

"I'll talk to him myself later. But… Thanks Em. Getting into his mind is much easier when we have someone to translate for us."

No. This place. This World Island… It was alive, aware, and *malicious*.

"I am simply doing my duty."

Just as Ling Mei could absorb its Qi, so too could it absorb her.

"Then you should get her to the table soon. I might not know anything about cultivation, but she's going to die in twenty-seven seconds if nothing is done."

Drowning in Qi, the desire of every cultivator, she was helpless to do anything as she was consumed by the Island.

Ling Mei, a genius cultivator, had tried to seize the heavens and been seized in turn.

Then a warm burst of flavor filled her mouth.

The pain faded, her meridians ceased aching, and her Golden Core no longer felt as if it would explode her dantian.

And Ling Mei could breathe!

As the food dissolved on her tongue, Ling Mei let out a sound that was a mix of a sigh and a moan.

The Qi remained just as thick as before, still omnipresent and thick enough to liquefy if given the chance, but it now seemed as if it was trying to devour her whole.

It was as if the heavens themselves had granted Ling Mei a stay of execution.

More than that, with the Qi density still so thick, Ling Mei felt her cultivation advancing at a blinding speed.

The pain she endured, and the Insight she had gained, was enough to propel her to the middle of the Golden Core realm, something she hadn't expected to achieve for another decade. Spending a few months here would get her to the edge of the Profound Sky realm!

Almost without conscious thought, Ling Mei's mouth opened to accept another mouthful of food.

Like the first, a burst of delicious flavor dissolved on her tongue and her overstuffed

channels relaxed further.

… Enough so that Ling Mei became conscious of the sounds around her for the first time since her arrival.

Opening her eyes, the Young Miss of the Twin Heavens sect found herself face to face with a laughing young woman no older than her.

“You were right Mikael,” she snickered, staring at Ling Mei. “Cultivators are hilarious. Her bodily response to the influx of energy is no less than a druggie getting her fix.”

“I’m always right~” A man singsonged.

“”””””””No, you’re not.”””””””

The man ignored the combined voices interrupting him to continue speaking.

“Don’t be hard be too hard on our little vic- Princess. She just went from the worst trash basuco cut with baking soda to the purest Columbian powder that would even make Snowflame overdose.”

“Please do not mention that man while we are eating,” a familiar voice spoke, and the kidnapped princess blinked slowly as she stared at the beautiful woman. One of… many. But this one was… familiar, somehow.

Ling Mei, uncomprehending what was happening, obediently opened her mouth and a third bit of food was placed on her tongue.

“What’s Columbian powder daddy?”

“It’s slang for a drug that causes momentary pleasure at the cost of long-term health.”

“Why would someone use that kind of drug? Why not use a better one?”

“Access and escapism. Some people are less fortunate and seek what pleasure they can get, even if it hurts them in the long run. Don’t forget that we are very lucky to have Mommy Tsu for any health issues.”

“But why don’t they make better drugs then?”

“Because not everybody is as smart as you are dear.”

“Oh… Should I make better drugs?”

“While that can be a project for the future, you should only do so when you’re older and understand the socioeconomic consequences of your actions. For now, continue to learn about the world and, only when you have formed your own opinion should you commit to a plan like that… Unless you just want to create them for fun and don’t plan on releasing them. Then go ahead so long as me or one of your moms are with you.”

“Okay Daddy.”

“Good girl. Now finish your dinner. Mommy Medea worked hard on it and the sooner you all finish the sooner we can get to movie time.”

“Can we watch a documentary tonight?”

“It’s Ismene’s turn to choose.”

“I guess Jojo’s good too.”

It was by the fifth bite that Ling Mei was aware enough to be able to recognize the face of the woman she’d been staring at while the man spoke to the little girl seated beside him at the table.

(Her mind absently noted her as Olivia, the little girl who found Sarig and Jiraiya Senju accosting her and her fellow sect disciples.)

When she could finally put a name to the face and voice, Ling Mei couldn’t help but blurt it out.

“Shuang Aima!?”

It was as if a spell was broken, and a torrent of sound and images suddenly became clear to Ling Mei.

She was seated at a long rectangular table positively bursting with beautiful women. No including her, there were sixteen women eating and talking amongst each other. Interspersed between them were a few young children, but none older than the two boys who had kidnapped her.

“Wonderful of you to join us,” the sole man, seated at the head of the table, gave her a mischievous smile. “I was worried we’d have to keep you locked in a tower until you got better.”

The man’s eyes were a burning orange with obviously slit pupils.

A fully grown dragon!

“The Mansion does not possess a tower, Sir Bard. Perhaps we should recreate mine home in Ariamis?” A pale woman with long white hair, slightly scaly skin and spikes for eyebrows over slit green eyes said, and Ling Mei’s head snapped to her.

Dragons. A table full of dragons!

She’d been taken to a dragon’s den!

“You know, that’s not a bad idea,” the Dragon King, for that was what he must be, rubbed his chin in thought. “What do you say kids? What to make a clubhouse with Daddy?”

““Yes!””

“You two are still in trouble,” a… voluptuous blonde dragon said, glaring at Sarig and Jiraiya who wilted under her look.

“It’s alright boys,” the Dragon King laughed, getting a glare as well, to which he winked back. “So am I. We’ll do it when we’re out of the drake-house.”

Both boys looked noticeably happier at that and started eating again.

Ling Mei seized the brief lull to increase her chance of survival.

She descended from her chair to kneel toward the table full of creatures more powerful than even the Sect Master.

“A hundred thousand pardons to the Dragon King. This humble one is Ling Mei, a lowly disciple of the Twin Heavens Sect and failed to greet the Esteemed Ones properly. The Long Island sect is more wondrous than imagined and this lowly one was overcome in its splendor. The name of Mai Keer is as thunder in this humble one’s ears and this one begs your benevolence in sparing my sect for any offense this humble one might have caused Your Eminence”

Everyone had watched her entreaty in silence, some in surprise, but her plea was met with an unexpected response.

Laughter.

Not from the Dragon King, who watched her with a neutral face, but from the young woman sitting across from Ling Mei. She was the youngest here by far excepting the actual children. Perhaps not even in out of her teen years and into full womanhood.

“Hahahaha,” she howled, pounding her fist on the table. “’Mai Keer!’ ‘Long Island Sect!’ Oh god, she’s great! Can we keep her? Can we?”

“Hey,” Sarig stood up in his chair, pointing a finger at the laughing woman. “Don’t bully our Princess! She’s ours!”

The blonde woman who sat between him and Jiraiya placed a firm hand on his shoulder and forced him back into his seat.

“Sorry little guy,” the laughing woman said, not sounding regretful in the least as she reached over to ruffle his curly hair. He batted her hand away with a pout.

“Val. Don’t laugh.”

The room fell into complete silence, not even the clinking of silverware continuing after the Dragon King’s order.

Ling Mei, who remained bowed, couldn’t see his face as he spoke.

“Ling Mei comes from a world where strength is the be all, end all. Where any old man on the road can kill millions. Where cities are regularly destroyed overnight. Where you never know if one wrong word to someone stronger than you can result in your entire family being wiped out. As a woman in such a world, particularly one with a unique body like hers, you can imagine her fate were she to displease someone above her. I hate formality, just as much as you, but to people like her it was a shield. Her only shield in a world where justice is just a concept used by the weak to make themselves feel better about their terrible lives in the hope that the immortal, all powerful monsters shaped like them will one day feel a fraction of pain they inflict on people just trying to live their lives.”

"…Sorry."

"It's all right. You're still adjusting to your Element. Just remember that something funny to us might be a source of trauma to others. She genuinely thinks that we will kill, eat, or… defile her because of her Pure Spring Divine Bod, which is a resource many wouldn't pass up on. Maybe we'll do all three. Yet rather than ask to be spared, she's begging for her sect's safety. Why is that, Ling Mei? Why not beg for your life?"

Ling Mei responded without hesitation.

"This humble one's life is yours to do with as you please, Esteemed Dragon King. This humble one merely wished for benevolence to be carried to the Twin Heavens Sect. This humble one's father, teacher, and sect brothers and sisters are blameless for this humble one's failure to respect the illustrious Long Island Sect."

"Family, huh."

There was a beat of silence as Mikael met the eyes of not only Valeria, but also of his kids who were watching this event with distressed looks. Sarig and Jiraiya looked angry, Olivia was frowning, and Ismene was openly crying.

"If I were to kill this woman right here and now-"

"""""Daddy don't-"""""

"Shh. Let your father speak."

"If I were to kill this woman right here and now, she'd consider it a mercy. If I told her Sect, they'd have to thank me and apologize for the inconvenience she caused me. Do you all know why?"

"…Because they're scared." Olivia answered quietly.

"They, and Ling Mei, are scared." Mikael nodded at his eldest daughter. "Scared of my power. Of what I could do to them and what they cherish. There is no greater fear in a cultivation world than the fear of death. Their entire lives revolve around running from death. In doing so, in fear of an End that will inevitably come, they make Life cheap. Fear is good. It keeps us alive. But it isn't all there is. So do not laugh when someone begs for their lives or those of those they love. Just as I once did. Instead, help them to their feet and teach them that Life is more than a fear of Death, even if that fear is all they've ever known."

A hand, rough and calloused from years of hard struggle, gently pulled Ling Mei from her kneeling position and she found herself looking up at the gentle eyes of the Dragon King.

He was smiling. Gentle at first, but once she was standing on her own feet, his smile turned mischievous again.

He pulled out the chair she had been seated in and gently guided her back to her seat

beside Shuang Ai, who had been the one feeding her the lifesaving food.

The Dragon King's smile was gentle at first, but once she was seated, his smile turned mischievous again.

CLAP!

"Since we do not plan on hurting you and will return you home after dinner if you wish, let's get introductions out of the way," the Dragon King, as if the grave mood never existed, simply retook his seat with a smile. "I'm Mikael. Dragon Dad. You know Em and Emma Frost." He gestured to Shuang Ai and Shuang Aima respectively. "We're the only ones to really interact with your world so, like me, they used iterations on our names to fit in better."

There he went using 'your world' again. Even without his strength, it was clear the Dragon King came from a higher realm of sorts by his words and actions.

"Use whichever name works best for you," Shua- Emma Frost said casually, sipping a red drink from a clear glass.

"Beside Emma, is Nico Robin. You met our daughter Olivia." A more traditionally beautiful woman, with long dark hair and clear skin, seated next to Olivia. The resemblance between the pair was clear, only differing in the younger girl's curlier hair and darker eyes.

"Beside her is Melina-"

"And?" It was a woman with one regular eye one made of flame that raised a brow and interrupted the man.

Wasn't she worried about displeasing the Dragon King?

"I was getting there. And the Phoenix."

Ling Mei's heart skipped a beat. A phoenix?!

At least a few beasts could claim to have the bloodline of dragons, extremely diluted as it might be, but a Phoenix was another story entirely!

"They're kind of a two-for-one special and the bird brain doesn't like to be ignored. You'd think it was used to it by now. Anyway, next is Scathach." A woman who'd taken one look at Ling Mei, gave a nod, then went back to speaking to the blonde next to her. "Then Glynda Goodwitch."

"Greetings."

"Artoria Pendragon."

"Your courage and integrity does you credit." Another fair-haired woman, just as… bodacious as Tsunade gave Ling Mei a respectful nod.

Ling Mei wondered why there were more plates in front of this 'Artoria' than any other four people combined but knew better than to ask. Besides, if there were dragons

and phoenixes here, perhaps she was a Tao Tie?

"Priscilla is our floofy dragon." The woman with scales blushed and ducked her head shyly at the Dragon King's introduction. "And the woman on her other side is Hippolyta."

Hippolyta gave Ling Mei a long, intense look that she didn't have the context to understand. Evaluating, perhaps? Or commiserating? Either way, the Dragon King moved on the young woman who had laughed earlier.

"You'll have to forgive Valeria for her insensitivity earlier. She's run away from home for a dashing older man, and he's brought changes to her life. It's left her… emotional."

If the way Mikael's mouth was twitching from a barely repressed smile didn't clue Ling Mei into the fact that there was secret in his words, then the chorus of ""Booo!"" and groans from women around the table would have clued her in.

Some even went so far as to throw food at the Dragon King!

Ling Mei was prepared to grovel again at the serious breach of etiquette and the loss of face it brought, but Mikael just laughed and held up… the Boss? between him and the food.

Faster than Ling Mei could follow, all the food in the air disappeared and the fat cat let out a tiny purr of satisfaction before Mikael set it back on his lap.

"Ignore his jokes," Valeria said, but she was laughing as she addressed Ling Mei. "I really am sorry for laughing at you like that. I just became a Paradox Dragon, and my first manifestation was Logic/Emotion. It makes me a sociopath if I don't reign it in."

"That is quite alright Young Miss," Ling Mei clasped her hands and bowed deeply, not understanding half of what was said. "This humble one would never dare to question a lady of your stature."

"…Your world is kinda messed up." Valeria was no longer laughing as she looked over Ling Mei as if she were a particularly interesting alchemical ingredient.

"Perhaps we should not toss rocks in our particular glass house," Hippolyta told the younger woman.

"Our world was pretty normal though," Valeria shook her head and her smile returned. "Tell you what, I'll bring you back to your home after dinner and help you for a bit to make up for you."

"But we just caught her," Jiraiya pouted and crossed his arms. "I don't want to give up our first Princess. I won't."

"Jiraiya." Mikael's tone was warning, but not harsh.

"…sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"…"

“Kidnapping Princesses is fine,” Mikael lectured. “But keeping them against their will is wrong. If they want to stay, they can but you should never force anyone. Understand?”

“…I understand.”

Mikael kept an eye on his eldest child for second, to make sure he really did, then he gave a grin and leaned forward over the table, covering his mouth as if he was trying to tell the boy a secret.

“Psst.” He hissed loud enough for everyone to hear. “That just means you need to get your Princesses to *want* to stay.”

That cheered the children up and Ling Mei felt distinctly uncomfortable as all four kids looked at her with shining eyes.

“Anyway, got distracted a bit,” Mikael sat back in his seat and continued with his introduction beginning where he left off at the end of the table. “You know Em, but on your other side is Medea. She’s the one who made this delicious meal and saved your life.”

Ling Mei gave the woman a bow.

“A thousand years of gratitude. This humble one is ashamed that she could not handle the Long Island Sect Qi, for it is as bright as the sun and as deep as the ocean. If there is anything you wish, please speak and this humble one will go to any lengths to accomplish it.”

Rather than waive her off or dismiss her offer as useless, for what could Ling Mei do that this dragon couldn’t achieve, Medea instead perked right up.

“Perfect. I’ve been meaning to get a better grasp of Qi. It technically falls under ‘Magic’ so I can interfere with it, but I need a practitioner’s perspective if I want to get holistic grasp of it.”

“No dissections on this one. I’ll get you others,” Mikael said plainly and then, ignoring Ling Mei’s look of fear, continued. “You’ve met Sarig, this is his mother, Tsunade and on her other side is Jiraiya. They’re our oldest and little troublemakers. I don’t know where they got it from.”

“““““““““““From you.”””””””””””””

“““““From Daddy!”””””

It was almost disconcerting how half the women present answered as one, but the children joining in at the same time made it cute, with how Sarig and Jiraiya high-fived behind their mother’s back as they laughed at the unified response.

“It’s a complete mystery.”

“I apologize for any trouble they caused,” Tsunade gave Ling Mei a tight smile as she side-eyed her boys and her husband, whose face was completely expressionless… Which lasted until Ismene poked him in the cheek and he squished hers in turn, much to her

delight. “I’ll be having a… talk with them later.”

“Please do not be too harsh. The Young Masters did not harm us and saved this humble one’s life from a demonic sect elder.”

Ling Mei, despite her situation, did have a pretty good impression of the children. She hadn’t been hurt, or even really inconvenienced by them (baring the current kidnapping, which was turning out surprisingly well.)

Without Jiraiya and Sarig there, Ling Mei would probably be dead, or worse, at the hands of the Mo Xi. Even her junior brothers had been left alive to report what had happened to the sect.

(Mu Bang’s injuries were, of course, forgotten about. Such was the cruel fate of Mook A in a cultivation world.

But don’t give up Mook A!

I believe that with hard work, perseverance, and enough luck, you will get promoted to full Henchman status!

Fight on Mook Bang!)

“They did?” Tsunade asked, seeming to be genuinely surprised as she gave her boys a more evaluating look.

“He was trying to take our Princess!” Sarig ‘explained,’ throwing a fist in the air as if punching someone. “So, we beat him up. He was very poor though. The Boss ate most of his stuff, but we got some pills and plants for you Mommy. And books. And clothes. And-“

“Awweee,” the dark-skinned woman seated on Sarig’s other side reached over ruffled his curly hair. He growled, but she just did it again. “You can’t stay mad at these little guys when they’re helping people, can you Tits?”

“I can. They still snuck out and need to be punished for that.” Both boys wilted but Tsunade’s voice softened as she continued. “But, since some good came of it, I suppose you can help with the clubhouse.”

“Yay.”

“Thanks mommy.”

“What about me?” Mikael asked.

“You’re still in trouble,” Tsunade responded with narrowed eyes, but her lip was twitching.

“I guess I am sleeping on the couch tonight,” Mikael muttered, seeming to wilt…

No, he really was wilting! Ling Mei noticed that the color had drained not only from his skin, but also from his hair and clothes. A small storm cloud formed over his head. And was that… music? It was. A dirge from an instrument Ling Mei didn’t recognize.

She was going to say something, but Ling Mei noticed how none of the women at the

table seemed concerned. Some were even rolling their eyes. They all knew that Mikael would never actually 'sleep on the couch' as it were. He'd just 'make it up' to Tsunade in a more… intimate way once the kids were in bed. That didn't stop him from milking the drama for all it was worth.

Unfortunately, some people were just too pure for this world.

"Don't worry Daddy," Ismene smiled, her cheeks dimpling as she stood in her chair to pat him on the shoulder. "You can sleep with me tonight."

Overcome with cuteness, Mikael dissipated the illusion to cuddle his little girl.

"Since he's busy," the dark-skinned woman said to Ling Mei, leaning forward to see past Tsunade's… Tsunades. "I'm Yoruichi. This little blueberry, who's pretending to be dignified, is Ranni." "Cat!" "Then Diana, who is and is not Hippolyta's daughter, and Raven."

Ling Mei opened her mouth to ask about 'Raven' when she realized there was a woman she hadn't even noticed, despite her white cloak.

"I was getting there," Mikael pouted, Ismene still seated on his lap.

"If we waited for you, we'd be here for hours," Diana told him, before looking at Yoruichi in exasperation. "Why did you introduce me like that?"

"Because it was funny."

"Anyway," Mikael returned his attention Ling Mei. "That just leaves this little bean, Ismene, mine and Medea's daughter. Not to be confused with Medea, the Floofiest of Floofs."

"Mrow."

Ling Mei jumped in surprise from the sound that came from right below her feet.

"That means you should feed her," Mikael said, cracking a grin at Ling Mei's surprise. "She'll eat anything, but the best food is what comes off of someone else's plate."

"Mrow."

Hesitantly, and under the encouraging eyes of everyone else, Ling Mei picked up her bowl and, slowly, put it on the ground in front of the cat.

It disappeared, food and bowl, before she could blink.

"Mrow."

"Good job." Jiraiya gave Ling Mei a thumbs up as she sat back up. There was a new bowl, freshly filled, right in front of her.

"It was this humble one's… pleasure…" Ling Mei was still very, very confused. It didn't help that she was still slightly high from the Qi influx. She'd been keeping admirably steady despite that, taking everything in as best as she could, but even she had limits. "Will… Medea not be… sitting to dine with us?" It just seemed so odd that a table

of beasts like this would force one to eat on the floor.

That got her some odd looks, which had her shifting uncomfortably.

“Why would she?” Mikael asked, as if Ling Mei was the crazy one here. “She’s a cat.”

“But…” Ling Mei looked from the Medea next to her to the cat, who had migrated over to sit on Ismene’s lap, who was sitting on Mikael’s lap.

“Oh.” Ismene seemed to realize the source confusion. “Mommy is not a cat. The Boss was just named after her.”

“MROW!”

“I think you mean,” Mikael calmed down his pet with grin. “That your mom was named after my cat.”

“Mrow.”

“No treats for two days,” Medea told her ‘namesake’ with a devilish grin.

“MROW!?”

Suddenly the tubby feline was on the witch’s lap, flapping her tiny wings pitifully as her eyes started to water.

“…mrow?…”

Medea sighed and started to scratch the cat’s jowls, much to her delight.

Yoruichi, seeing an opportunity for more chaos, decided to ‘help’ Ling Mei.

“A cat sitting down for dinner? That’d be…” In the place of the dark-skinned woman was now a black cat. A black cat that spoke with a deep, male, voice. “…Insane, wouldn’t you agree?”

Ling Mei opened her mouth.

Ling Mei closed her mouth.

Open.

Close.

Open.

A spoon of food was shoved into it.

“Ignore them and eat some more,” Em Frost told Ling Mei as she set her spoon down. “It will help you process.”

Obediently Ling Mei began to eat, trying to ignore the laughter and talking filled the room as the meal progressed.

With every bite, clarity began to return to her and Ling Mei’s heart rate was starting to pick up as the euphoric feeling of the Qi influx faded to the background.

What was she doing?!

AHHHHHH!

She was seated at a table with dragons, phoenixes and who knew what other

monsters. She'd been taken to a sect so much stronger than the Twin Heavens and was who knew how far from home.

Looking around, they didn't seem like demonic cultivators. In fact, they were utterly foreign, both in appearance and behavior. Their clothes were odd. Their names were odd. Their comportment was even odder.

They talked openly on subjects that went way above Ling Mei's head-

("I prefer Stands to Hamon or Spin," Olivia told her sister and father. "The breadth of creativity in their uses and powers make for engaging plots."

"Spin spin spin spin spin spin," was Ismene's response, spinning in place.

"I'd have thought you'd appreciate the mathematical applications of The Spin," Mikael said, spinning his youngest above his head with one hand.

"It interesting," Olivia conceded but shook her head. "But I like the breadth of creativity in Stands uses and powers make for engaging plots. Each is a puzzle to be solved as much as a weapon to be used.")

-No doubt the secrets of higher realms of cultivation.

More disconcerting was their lack of any sort of propriety!

Yoruichi, turning back into her human form, had been completely nude! And nobody seemed to care! Certainly, she redressed quickly enough, but her clothes barely covered anything.

The Dragon King even kissed a few of his wives!

In front of others!

These were obviously inhuman creatures with a complete lack of understanding of proper decorum.

But the most important question was simple.

What were they going to do with Ling Mei?

They said they'd return her, but they could be lying.

Maybe the Dragon King would take her as a concubine. Or possibly for his sons? They were young certainly, but Ling Mei was only twenty-five years old at the moment. That age difference wouldn't matter in a century or two.

It was possible, especially when one considered that Valeria couldn't be older than seventeen. Who knew what age was acceptable to dragons? Ling Mei doubted she'd be taken as the main wife, even with her Pure Spring Divine Body.

Compared to the women around her, she was more than a few steps behind in qualification, so the best she could hope for would be a valued concubine.

Ling Mei was… uncertain about how she felt about that.

No doubt the resources of the Long Island Sect would help her cultivation in ways that

were impossible to imagine. Even the scraps from this table had been enough to raise 'The Boss' to who knew what realm. Thousands of women would kill to be in the position she found herself in.

Yet Ling Mei was reluctant. It wasn't that she was unwilling to take a cultivation partner or that she wouldn't aid her sect if her marriage was what was required.

It was that it had been against her will.

When Ling Mei reached the peak, it wouldn't be because of her own efforts and dedication. A lucky encounter was not to be spurned but nor should one's fate be determined by another.

"How are you feeling," Medea asked as Ling Mei finished her… soup? It was as if it were a congee but with odd grains and more liquid. "Any side effects?"

"This humble one thanks Senior Medea." Despite being surprised by the interruption to her thoughts, Ling Mei did not forget that she was very much in a den of dragons. "This humble one is feeling much better, a testament to Senior Medea's alchemy."

"It's actually my aunt's recipe," Medea explained with a kind smile. "It was practically all she fed us while I studied with her."

"I much prefer your version to the poison Circe used on me," Hippolyta nodded in agreement.

"'Kykeon can be medicine or poison. It's practically ambrosia. Teehee.'" Medea quoted, even giving a slightly silly smile at the end.

"Was there any truth to the theory that it contained psychedelics that caused hallucinations?" Valeria asked, finishing her own meal.

"A few recipes can do so, either with magecraft or simple herbcraft," Medea nodded. "My aunt usually didn't though. Either she was giving her all to feed a guest or was using it as a base to conceal a potion's taste. There was no point in giving the pigs hallucinations."

Suddenly Ling Mei was much more worried about what she just ate.

"Do not worry." As if Em could read Ling Mei's mind, she answered the question before it could be asked. "Her aunt was famous for turning men who invaded her home into pigs but there was nothing wrong with the food. You are safe here and will be returned to the sect just as you are."

Ling Mei, fearing she had shown something she should have, schooled her expression as best she could.

It must not have been enough, because Hippolyta spoke up to reassure her further.

"Do you know why Mikael taught his children it was alright to kidnap Princesses even if he won't allow them to 'keep' one?"

Ling Mei didn't know what she should say that wouldn't risk offense, but not speaking when spoken to directly was also rude, so she hesitantly answered.

"Should this humble one guess, would it not be how the Dragon King has… met one of his partners in the past?"

"Not technically wrong," Medea conceded. "In fact, of his wives, only Robin and Glynda are not princesses, queens, a king, or heirs to a clan of wealth or prestige. And we did meet by him kidnapping us, all be it unintentionally."

Ling Mei wanted to ask how one 'unintentionally' kidnapped a dozen women of royalty but knew that would be a step too far.

"But why princesses specifically?" Hippolyta pressed.

"Because he's a dragon and thinks it's funny," Valeria answered confidently.

"Also not wrong," Em said with a smile, but she answered Hippolyta's actual question. "Because 'Princesses' is an often-overlooked insight into a society. Most societies use the young women of upper classes as bargaining chips, to forge alliances, or as capital to be used to further a ruling class's aims. Their personalities and experiences also speak a lot. Are they drowning in luxury and completely disconnected from the common people? Are they educated and loved or forced to focus on just being a good bride? Societies mirror their rulers and rulers mirror their societies."

Ling Mei felt her heart skip a beat as she was forced to reevaluate Mikael.

Was the Dragon King so devious? Had he planned something like this just to get information? Had she given something away without realizing it? And using his children in his plans?

"Also not wrong," Hippolyta repeated Em's words. "But if Mikael truly wished for information, he'd just know it or look for himself. Nobody would be able to stop him. No. The reason Mikael encouraged the children to kidnap 'princesses' is because he is being kind."

Ling Mei wanted to ask why kidnapping princesses was being kind but, judging by the way the other women around her were nodding in understanding, she feared speaking up. Thankfully, the Amazon explained in a way Ling Mei could understand.

"They are all right, of course. Mikael does it because he finds it funny, gets him information, and because you never know if someone picked up might be a future friend or lover for one of his children. There is also the aspect that it gives his children practical experience in the world and getting them invested in someone outside of the Family. But for the same reason that a princess can give information, they might be in need of help. If they don't, Mikael sends them on their way. No harm done, maybe even benefiting a little."

The way Hippolyta eyed Ling Mei let her know the woman was speaking of her, which Ling Mei couldn't deny. Even if she ignored all the information she gained, just returning to the sect with her advanced cultivation was already an incalculable blessing.

"But if the 'Princess' needs help? If she's in a situation where she doesn't want to return? Then he can use his children's kidnapping of them as an excuse to apologize. Do a favor to someone who needs it. After all, he's just correcting a 'wrong' he committed and helping his kids." Hippolyta gave Ling Mei a tight smile. "If you stick around long enough, you will learn that Mikael will always advance his own agenda and 'coincidentally' help others along the way."

"Many thanks Senior Hippolyta for your wisdom," Ling Mei bowed in gratitude for the explication. She'd believe it once she was safely gone from this den of beasts, but the attempt to alleviate her worries deserved thanks for what it was. "The Dragon King is truly blessed to have a woman such as you."

Right away, Ling Mei was conscious of the fact that she had something wrong by the tightening of the woman's eyes.

Thankfully, she didn't lash out and kill Ling Mei for whatever it was.

"I am afraid you have made a mistake," Hippolyta's smile was a little less sincere. "I am not Mikael's woman. Nor do I wish to be. I am simply traveling with him to grow stronger to better defend my people."

Ling Mei was opening her mouth to apologize when Valeria cut her off.

"Don't worry about her," the teenager waived at the woman beside her. Hippolyta studiously ignored the younger girl. "She's just in denial about what she wants. Unlike me. I'm gonna get that scaly ass for myself."

"You're sixteen," Medea rolled her eyes. "He's not interested."

"I know, but that's part of my plan," Valeria replied with a confident smile. "I'm on step twenty-seven. I'll be thirty by step forty-eight. By step one hundred and five I'll be one of his wives."

"Or," Em drawled. "Like all teenage girls, you will grow out of your crush when it remains unrequited."

"Nope. There's only one Monster for this girl. You'll see."

"Uhuh," Em teased. Looking at Ling Mei, who was very confused, she explained. "Mikael doesn't… engage with anyone except his wives. Think of it as core to his Dao Heart, if you wish. So do not worry about your Primordial Yin or your Pure Spring Divine Body. He's completely uninterested."

Ling Mei let out some of the tension she'd been holding. A cultivator as strong as the Dragon King would not violate their Dao Heart lest they gain a Heart Demon that

prevented them from advancing.

Then, looking at the seating of the table, Ling Mei had another realization.

“You’re wrong.” Em said sharply as soon as the thought appeared in Ling Mei’s mind. “Yes, I am not one of his wives either, but there are no arranged seats. It is first come first served. The only reason we are at the tail end is because I will be the one to bring you back, Val wanted to talk with you, Medea needed to make sure you didn’t explode, and Hippolyta was talking to her.”

Ling Mei realized she had accidently hit a sore spot for all three women, Em especially. One that left their corner in an awkward silence.

Thankfully, Medea was able to alleviate the tension by asking Ling Mei about her cultivation. Specifically, about her experience with Qi, the nature of each realm and what distinguished them.

It was such common knowledge that Ling Mei had no trouble speaking about it without fear of leaking the sect’s secrets.

That, thankfully, carried the conversation until Artoria, despite eating the fastest, was done with her food.

“I think it’s time we say goodbye to our Princess,” Mikael finally said, waving his hand and cleaning the table.

““Awwww.”” Sarig and Jiraiya pouted, and the younger brother continued. “You didn’t give us time to convince her to stay.”

“You’ll just have to try harder next time,” Mikael teased and the boys perked up, obviously getting the idea he was hinting at.

“Don’t worry Princess,” Jiraiya ‘reassured’ Ling Mei. “You might be poor and weak, but we’ll kidnap you next time as well. And we’ll do it even better!”

Unsure whether to laugh or cry, Ling Mei just thanked the ‘Young Masters’ for their ‘consideration.’

“Bye bye.”

“Bye Princess.”

“See you next time!”

Mikael shuffled the children over to a nearby room as they waved goodbye. The women of the house began to split up, some in groups to return to their own activities, not forgetting to wish farewell to Ling Mei either.

As Em guided Ling Mei towards the entrance of the mansion, the Young Miss couldn’t help but notice something odd.

The Dragon King was seated with his children facing a screen of some sort… Yet another ‘Mikael’ was being pulled by Tsunade to another room.

And, as Ling Mei exited the building, she saw another ‘Mikael’ brushing a horned horse.

“The best way to think of him,” Em said, once more seeming to predict her thoughts. “Is to imagine the highest cultivation realm possible. Then imagine ten realms higher than that. Only then will you have the barest hint of Mikael.”

Ling Mei shuddered in fear at the idea. For some reason, she did not believe Shuang Ai was exaggerating.

“May this humble one ask a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why are you letting this one go? Are you not afraid this humble one will speak of what she has learned?”

Em gave Ling Mei a flat look.

“Will you?”

“This humble one would not dare.”

“Even if you did, it wouldn’t matter.” Em shrugged, conjuring one of those grey portals. “Your entire continent could throw themselves at me and wouldn’t scuff one of my scales.”

“If…” Ling Mei hesitated before deciding to take the risk. “If you are so strong, why haven’t you simply taken what you wished for from the Twin Heavens sect? We could not stop you.”

Em, halfway through the portal, looked back at Ling Mei.

“When you’ve reached the peak. When there’s nowhere left to climb, what will you do then?”

Ling Mei didn’t have an answer, and Em didn’t seem to expect one.

To a cultivator, there was only the climb.

Nobody ever thought of the summit itself or what followed after.

“If you ever reach that point, you’ll realize that there are some things worth more than power.”

The way Em’s eyes were locked on the mansion behind them, a look of deep yearning in those icy pools.

Then the moment was gone, and Ling Mei was through the grey portal and standing outside the gates of the Twin Heavens sect.

“You will win the upcoming ‘tournament’ your sect set up.” Em commanded. “We have no wish to deal with whatever simpleton your master wants to use to seduce us. Once you do, we’ll help you in exchange for knowledge of cultivation and other matters. It will be mutually beneficial and will not betray your sect.”

Ling Mei gave an awkward smile at the Sect Master being caught but bowed in respect. She was feeling much more comfortable now that she was back on familiar territory and knew these crazy dragons had held up their promise.

“This one will do her best. If this one may-“

“Why you?” Shuang Ai cut her off and Ling Mei was really starting to wonder if the woman couldn’t really read her thoughts. “It’s not because the boys kidnaped you. It’s because Ismene let them.”

Ling Mei blinked in surprise, not understanding.

“If you are around us long enough, you’ll get it,” Em shook her head. “Just remember this. You can argue, disagree, or even fight anyone and it won’t be held against you. Me. Mikael. Medea. It doesn’t matter. Except for Ismene. If she doesn’t like you, you won’t even realize you’ve died.”

Ling Mei gulped, not realizing that the cute little girl was such a terrifying being.

Em nodded, glad the girl was taking her warning seriously. Knowing her hus-

Knowing Mikeal, he wouldn’t have set her up to be his son’s ‘first princess’ if she wouldn’t stick around for at least a little while.

Ling Mei returned to her sect, safe and sound, even a bit stronger than before and with the greatest opportunity one could dream of laid out before her. So much happened in such a short time that, even as she warned her father and master of the threat of the demonic sects, and the importance of keeping the Long Island sect pleased, that Ling Mei couldn’t help but fear she was forgetting something important.

(Xiao Tian, Mu Bang, and sect brothers B and C would go on to flee the province, afraid of the retaliation of the Twin Heavens Sect for failing their mission and losing the Young Miss.

‘Hunted’ as they were, they’d form bonds of brotherhood and friendship stronger than steel and go on hundreds of adventures. By the time they learned Ling Mei had been safe, and they weren’t being hunted, it would be centuries later.

Mu Bang would spit out a mouthful of blood and pass out.)

It probably wasn’t important anyway.

When Jiraiya and Sarig snuck out again, they’d show up in the middle of a battle between the sects. After beating up the demonic cultivators and ‘kidnaping’ Ling Mei once more, they’d try to convince her to stay with their ‘awesome clubhouse’ (read: magical fortress).

Even in the years to come, and dozens of kidnappings later, Ling Mei would never forget Em’s warning and slowly learn how true it was.

All of Mikael’s children were little monsters in the making.

But even with siblings with Elements like Peace, War, Knowledge, or even future children, Ismene would still be the most dangerous. It was lucky she was so kind and loving.

Then again, she probably wouldn't have gained her Element if she wasn't that way.

If the Dragon of Family disapproves of you… You probably never existed in the first place.

"And that is how your older brothers kidnapped their first Princess," Mikael closed the book quietly, smiling at the sight of his newest group of children trying in vain to stay awake.

So cute!

Conjuring two more bodies, Mikael picked up the babies and was about to bring them to bed, despite their cries for more stories.

On the way, he ran into Ling Mei who bowed.

He never really managed to get her to cut out with the formalities.

With a hint of Qi, Ling Mei transmitted her voice to his ear to not wake up the infants.

"Dragon King, can you please tell me where Jiraiya is?"

"He and Sarig are out being bandits again."

Ling Mei pressed her lips together, bowed once more, and made to leave to find the teenager.

He was supposed to kidnap her last week!

Then Ling Mei paused, looking at Mikael in hesitation.

"Yes?"

"I have a question, if I may?"

"Sure."

"Why the Twin Heavens sect? There are better cultivation manuals out there. Stronger ones. So why did you choose us?"

"The Twin Mind Spirit technique was originally called the Dual Body Mind Spirit technique," Mikael explained quietly, a teasing smile on his face. "Your founder discovered it in a ruin and changed it. We simply wanted to get the newer version to recreate the original."

"Would it be possible for me to learn the original?" Ling Mei asked, always eager to expand her knowledge of cultivation.

"Sure," Mikael grinned, conjuring a book and putting it in the young woman's hands.

She quickly opened it and flipped through it, her face turning redder with every word read.

Mikael laughed loudly at seeing her face, carefully ensuring the sound didn't reach the babies.

"The Dual Body Mind Spirit technique is the only dual cultivation method that has no practical requirements for the practitioners while still allowing one party to transfer Qi from one party to the other. Or at least it's the only one that requires such a fun method. My wives don't

want to cultivate," Mikael shrugged with a teasing smile. "I, on the other hand, am dedicated to the Dao and retain a firm heart. They are just helping me with my cultivation, which also makes them stronger."

Ling Mei stood there, a lewd book in hand, as Mikael walked away laughing.

The Heavens were sometimes cruel, sometimes kind, sometimes fair, and sometimes unjust.

And sometimes…

Just sometimes…

The Heavens will completely upend your life because it wants to have kinky sex with its wives.

Author's Note:

Here we go, the last part of our little story. It's long enough I could have made it two, but there was no good place to split it.

I wanted these little chapters to be a bit of slice of life after the end of Rapturous Rhapsody. Hopefully it was an entertaining read. That isn't to say I might not return to these characters or setting, but it is highly dependent on my muse and what I feel like writing in between my main work.

I have another Side Story for release next week but that is a different thing created for Valentines Day. Expect lewds.

I will see you all next time.

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER (ADULT)

Em arranged the files on her desk, making sure that everything was in order from when Mikael would need them. Then she checked the weekly schedule, set up a reminder to reschedule a lunch with Richards, and shot off an email to cancel a meeting with Worthington Industries-

-then froze.

…What was happening?

Slowly, Em scanned the waiting room, panning from her desk to luxurious chairs and tasteful decor.

It was a familiar room. One she had seen thousands of times as she passed through it on the way to her office in Frost Pharmaceuticals.

Sometimes, she'd even stop and talk to whichever secretary she had at the time to keep up the illusion that she couldn't just pull any answers she needed from their head.

A secretary whose desk she now sat behind, facing a waiting room with notable businessmen and women, well known figures, or celebrities forced to sit patiently until her boss decided they were worthy of his time.

Her boss…

Em's heartbeat quickened into a frenzied pace as she realized what was going on.

What it meant…

Mikael had rewritten reality… or at least *her* reality.

Em had memories of waking up in her luxurious apartment, having her chauffeur drive her to the Frost headquarters, and beginning another day on the job. The same job as the day before.

The same job she'd had for *years*.

Em had memories of years of schooling, of clawing her way of up the political and business world. Decades of effort, all to get this position as Mikael's secretary.

Yet… none of it had actually happened, had it?

It was all Mikael's creation.

Done on a whim.

Was it an illusion? A pocket world? Another dimension? Or was this all a wholesale creation that Mikael had made from scratch, just for her?

Because Mikael, even with all his power, wouldn't control her.

Yes, this was all fake, as were her memories, but he had done it in such a way to ensure she knew it was fake.

She hadn't been in this… illusion, for lack of clarification, for more than a few seconds.

If Em wanted to, she could purge these fake memories from her mind in heartbeat. They were clearly separate and untethered from what had really happened.

A mental snip, and it would all come falling apart.

But Em wouldn't cut this world from her mind even if Darkseid were here and tried to force her too.

Yes, the memories were fake, but they *meant* something real.

No, she hadn't spent years aspiring to be Mikael's secretary.

Instead, she had spent much longer than that trying to be something much greater.

His.

Em had the memories of His Emma. She had the Element, the feelings, even the semblance of Emma Frost.

When she had first stepped through that portal, fresh from 'her' death at Darkseid's hands, she had thought of herself as His Emma.

But she wasn't.

The look on his face, when he had gazed at her at that moment, at once loving and completely heartbroken, had told Emma what she was.

She was just another Company clone.

Em was just one of countless 'Emma Frosts' from the multiverse stored for the multidimensional sex slavery ring, ready to be shipped out to the next purchaser.

Warranty did not fix the broken 'product.'

It simply replaced it with one so identical that only a being so beyond common sense in both insight and madness would be able to tell the difference.

And Em had to live with that knowledge.

Live with the knowledge that even though her very soul had been molded into the shape of a women, she was not His Emma Frost.

He brought back His Emma with his Ascendance, but where did that leave Em?

He had offered to free her of their influence, from the memories of Emma let her redefine herself without the Company's control.

Em had vehemently refused.

To do so would be to kill the 'her' now and replace her with whatever 'Emma Frost' had been first shipped to the Company.

Even though Mikael accepted her decision, Em knew it reminded him too much of His Emma.

After all, hadn't he done the same thing to her? Sure, it was accidental, but there was

no denying that the Emma Frost first summoned to the Island had died in the mind of a Mad Dragon, reborn as His Emma.

And that was the crux of the issue.

Em still remembered that Madness, that Love.

She knew what it meant to be His.

And she wasn't anymore.

Maybe one of the others, like Scathach or Robin would be able to move on from that. Take Mikael's offer of a fresh start on any world, even with the memories, and move beyond what they remembered but never really existed.

But not Em.

Say what you will about Emma Frost, but she wouldn't be broken by something like this.

So, she had set out to do what Frost had failed to achieve.

Become His.

The first step was to separate herself from His Emma. Only slightly though.

Only enough to matter.

Her platinum blonde hair was done up in a tight bun instead of hanging loose. Her blue eyes were framed with glasses. Her wardrobe became more functional, even if still flattering.

And, most importantly, Em gave up all plans, any at all, that had anything to do with Mikael and the Family. Or perhaps it would be better to say that she had dedicated herself fully to exactly one plan and nothing else was left.

Become someone Mikael would wholly see as His.

A mad plan, concocted by a mad woman in search of a Mad Love.

For years, through countless worlds, Em served as Mikael's absolute right hand.

In a way, her existence was superfluous.

Mikael was Existence.

Any dimension he touched became part of him, just as Em was. He was powerful enough that nothing she provided he couldn't do himself, faster and better.

But there in lay the key to Em's plan.

Even if she wasn't His anymore, Emma Frost *knew* Mikael.

Mikael hated boredom, loneliness, and forcing others to get what he wanted.

Could he find a cultivation world and suddenly know everything there was to know about it?

Sure, but he wouldn't for the same reason he lived his life separate from all the knowledge seeing the future would bring.

Because otherwise it would be boring.

Mikael would exist forever, there was no need to rush.

So, if he wanted a sect's secret manuals, and didn't want to start acting like an omnipotent god (even though he was one) he would do things the fun way.

Fun, like setting up a fake sect and start trolling everyone else in the world.

And Em would be there, by his side, every step of the way.

For years, Em had steadily continued her plan. Not to become indispensable, for Mikael was too powerful for that, but to be as ubiquitous as his own hands.

As ubiquitous as everything else that was His.

With memories of his Love burning her mind like a prod…

With the phantom touches from nights that never were searing across her skin…

With the certainty of her own existence being nothing more than a forgery reflected in his eyes…

Em endured for years.

If she just wanted sex, Em could have had it in that first year. Emma made no secret of her desire to have her… clone, for lack of better term, join them in bed. Even the rest of the Family, as jealous as some could be, probably wouldn't have stopped it. They understood her situation and, with Mikael's ability to be anywhere he wished to be, early concerns of lack of attention were things of the past.

But Em didn't want sex… or at least not just sex.

(It had been years since she got any, after all. A woman had needs. Just because Em was laying the groundwork for eternity, didn't mean that she didn't get horny.)

No, Em wanted what she remembered having.

That Mad Love from a man, a monster, and a god.

And she wouldn't settle for anything less.

Mikael had been understanding and laid out their 'deal' in as plain terms as he could.

'You are not Mine.' His eyes hadn't been unkind, but they had been firm. 'Just as the countless other Emma Frosts through the multiverse that I can see, speak to, and seduce if I wished are not Mine. My love, crazy as it sounds, is born from the women who helped me at my lowest throughout a century a hell, compounded by the pulling them into my Dream for millions of years. I cannot even promise that you can be Mine. Or if it is possible, it will happen any time soon. Are you sure this is what you want?'

As always, Mikael let people make their own decisions.

And as always, Em didn't see any other choice.

Even if it meant millions of years, or billions…

Even if she had to wait till universes died and Mikael and what remained of the

Family were the last beings that existed…

Emma Frost, the one born in the mind of a Mad Dragon's Mad Love, and the one created in her image, was just as broken as the man she fell in love with.

Only it hadn't taken millions of years.

It hadn't even taken two decades.

As she looked around this fake recreation of her office, as she reviewed the fake memories planted in her head, Em didn't need Mikael to say a single word to understand everything.

So, rather than react in any way to indicate that she was slightly different than the fake memories depicted her as Em continued her secretarial duties without a pause.

Even as her heart beat a stampede through her chest and her panties flooded with her arousal.

It was… easy.

These fake memories came with everything she needed to know.

In them, this day was not special. A regular Wednesday spent working as the secretary for the CEO of Frost Pharmaceuticals.

(Of course it was a Wednesday. Mikael hated Mondays but he hated Tuesdays more. Even as Existence, he still griped about the first two days of the week.

He probably would until the End.)

One after another, guests came and went as Em worked another day away.

She answered the phone, created appointments, canceled others, and passed messages through a dozen sub-divisions of the company. She even took a lunch break.

Hours passed.

…Did they?

For the second time, Em froze.

What… what was happening?

She thought she knew. She could separate the fake memories easily. But… It was so easy to fall into them.

Or had she?

Had only a moment passed and it only felt like hours because HE willed her to feel like that?

What was real? What was fake?

Where did her mind end and HIS creation begin?

NO!

That was the trick!

It was all HIM!

He was Existence!

Time. Space. Fake. Real.

None of it mattered!

He could trap her in this little mirage in her own mind for an eternity, yet only a second would pass!

The only reason she, pitifully weak and insignificant in comparison to Him, had even a chance of being more than a spec in that vast infinity of power and Love was because of who *she* was.

Because of whom He was! He was Free. He was Life. He was Existence.

But more than that, He was Mikael!

He would never do something like that to her because she was….

…It was all Em could do not to start furiously masturbating at her desk at the idea.

The bastard was teasing her!

Playing on both her fetishes and her deepest desire!

He was letting her stew in her juices, winding her up and up and up and up until Em was ready to burst.

And it was working!

The bastard.

As if to prove her point, Em watched the office door open.

She knew who was leaving. She'd been the one to let them in.

Yet Em couldn't help that her eye began to twitch as she watched the redhead stumble on wobbly legs, keeping her hand on the door for support.

"Sorry," Jean Grey mumbled in shame, her face flushed in embarrassment as she caught Em's eyes.

"Don't worry." Em plastered on her best Secretary Smile as she rose to her feet. "It happens all the time."

Like the other four women today, Emma escorted the mutant to the nearby bathroom, pointing out the various supplies provided to help clean herself up.

She then returned to her desk, grabbed the cleaning supplies and set out to wipe the floor from the trail Jean had left under the eyes of the others waiting to be called to Mikael's office.

Shame, arousal, humiliation and pride burned in Em's chest.

This was hardly the first time she'd helped clean up after one of Mikael's lovers. She'd been by his side for years.

Em always felt a surge of pride whenever her love demonstrated his superiority, whether as a lover, a man, a god, a fighter or in any other way.

The difference was the fact that ‘Jean Grey’ was not a member of the Family.

Mikael could of course grab a Jean Grey from any universe if he wanted to but even after his ascension, he’d remained fastidiously loyal to his wives.

(Much to many a woman’s consternation Mikael didn’t really do ‘flings.’

If some truly wished to join the Family, they’d have to make a genuine effort over years to establish a relationship with everyone before any sort of sex was possible. So far only Em and Valeria were the only ones who’d remained for longer than a few years.

Well, them and Hippolyta. But she always claimed, ‘Even if I travel with you, I have no desire to join with Lord Mikael in such a manner.’

Nobody was buying that line of self-delusion, but Mikael was fastidious in not forcing anything on anyone not an enemy.

Even if Em knew Emma had a week of Date Days placed on the woman caving in the next century.)

Which meant that this wasn’t a real person, but rather an illusion or a solidified image that Mikael created just to mess with Em.

And of Jean Grey of all people!

It didn’t matter that the fake memories in her head told her there was hardly a day gone by where some woman didn’t come out of his office in such a disheveled state.

What mattered was that Mikael had chosen the fake Jean Grey to be the one Em saw with cum dripping down her well used snatch and forced to clean up after!

Even if she held no love for Scott Summers anymore, Em still had her pride. She had the memories of ‘Emma Frost’ losing to the redhead in almost any way that mattered. To see her reduced to such a state validated Em on a deep level yet caused her to burn with intense jealousy.

The two emotions, and others, wared within her and just stoked her arousal even higher.

One way or the other, Mikael better make good on what he was doing to her, or Em was liable to explode.

Finally, Em finished cleaning the floor and rose to put away the cleaning supplies. She straightened out her too tight, too short skirt, well aware everyone in the room had gotten an eyeful of her sodden panties.

She then double checked her white blazer, ensuring that its sole button hadn’t popped from its tightness and that her breasts were pressing against it in such a way that it was clear she had nothing underneath yet still barely covered her areola to maintain the pretense of decency.

Not that it fooled anyone.

Em Frost was the picture of a slutty secretary, more at home in a porn film than any sort of professional setting.

It was as she was retaking a seat at her desk that her phone rang.

Em's heartbeat picked up as she noticed the number displayed.

"Yes Sir?"

"Come to my office."

That was it.

No explanation.

Four words.

A simple command in a tone that allowed no argument, said loud enough that everyone in the waiting room heard it.

All eyes were on Em Frost.

What would happen next was perfectly clear to everyone. If she went in there, they knew exactly what would happen to her.

There was only one thing she could say to that.

"Yes Sir."

With the grace of a queen, Em rose to her feet and went to meet her fate.

Her high heels clicked across the wood floor as she entered the office, making sure to close the door behind her.

For a second, Em just stood there.

Everything, from the furniture to the art and lighting, was exactly as she remembered from her home world.

With one difference.

Mikael was in her… his seat, reclining in the high back chair behind his desk. He was turned perpendicular to the door and his desk, allowing him to look out over the window that made up the back wall with an overview of New York.

Mikael didn't look at her as she entered.

Em approached with measured strides. Not fast, but not slow either.

Click. "Ack." Clack. "Gluck." Click. "Slurp." Clack. "Ack."

Em arrived in front of the desk, standing far enough away that she wasn't looming over it, yet close enough that she could watch the head of platinum blonde hair rise and fall as it skull-fucked itself into Mikael's crotch.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?"

"Gulp gulp gulp."

"How long have you been with me Em?"

Mikael was still looking out the window, even as his hand reaching down to hold

Emma Frost's head down as he came down her throat.

Em could have given the answer from the fake memories he had implanted.

Yet…

She couldn't read his mind. Nor Emma's. They weren't blocked so much it was as if they weren't there.

Unsure whether to continue the role play or not, she decided to give the answer in her heart.

"It has been thirteen years, forty-eight days, six hours, and twenty-seven minutes since I stepped out of that portal."

Every second a hell. Having the memories of being His yet knowing she truly had never been.

A torment that might end soon.

Finally, Mikael looked Em in the eyes.

Even without reading his mind, Em understood.

She had chosen to break the fantasy to be sincere and he would respond in kind.

"I will be honest," he said gravely. "I hated you."

"I know."

For there to be hope of your love to come back to life, only for a clone to appear?

To be strong enough to tell the difference yet weak enough to be unable to do anything about it?

Em hadn't needed to see into his mind to know what Mikael had felt at that moment. She had seen it in his eyes.

"When I got Emma back," Mikael continued, running his hand gently through his wife's hair. She had swallowed everything and was now licking him clean. "I… didn't know what to do with you. I don't look into the future so I had no idea what relationship we would or even *could* have."

Everyone knew Mikael heavily limited himself in day-to-day life. It would be easy for him to act as an omniscient, omnipresent being but he chose to remain largely as he was.

Not only would knowing what was to come ruin the fun of Life, but he never wanted to become something or someone he wasn't.

The greater 'Existence-Mikael' was as powerful as one could expect, and would stop anything truly catastrophic, but the 'Mikael' that they knew was what he chose to be.

And, in so doing, he could make mistakes.

Mess up, miscommunication, misunderstand, or even accidentally hurt those he loved. Such was the price Mikael chose to pay to engage the Family not as a deity, but as an equal.

“I decided to leave it up to you,” Mikael continued. Emma, her job done, tucked his dick back into his pants and redid his belt. “I can’t undo what had been done to you without killing the ‘you’ now, but I could give you that one freedom. You chose to stay, even knowing it might not lead anywhere.”

“Because it was worth it.”

“…I don’t think it is,” Mikael sighed. “You already have every benefit I have given to my Family. If it had been me, I would have left. No doubt I’d spend years, perhaps decades, getting over the heartbreak, but that would be better than waiting for a future that might never come. For something that might be impossible.”

“I am not you.”

“No. You’re not.” Mikael rose to his feet to tower over the two Emma Frosts. “And you aren’t My Emma. You never will be.”

Even now, even after all these years of knowing it to be true, even with that fact so seared into her soul that she wouldn’t forget it in death, it still hurt Em to hear that on a level most could never understand.

Emma remained kneeling beside the desk as Mikael stepped around until he was within arm’s reach of Em.

“I watched over My Family for millions of years as a Great One. Before that, I spent years trapped in my own personal hell where they were the sole light in that darkness. I will never be in the same mindset as that again. Even if I wanted to, which I do not, I will never be able to replicate that unique position that led to loving them in the way I do.”

That was the bare truth and why Em’s wish might be impossible.

Mikael might be the same man, but the situation had changed.

There were an infinite number of ‘Emma Frosts’ throughout the multiverse, just the same as his other wives, but only one version of them had been with Mikael through his lowest moments.

Only one Emma existed that had hurt Mikael and been hurt in turn. Only one Emma who he had made his confidant and served as a pivotal instrument on the Island in bringing the Family together.

There was only one Emma Frost who had been born from the Mad Love of an eldritch god.

And Em was not her.

She could never be her.

“I never thought loving someone else was impossible,” Mikael continued, his hands rising to cup her pale cheeks. His thumb rubbed the tear from her eyes. “Eternity is a long time, after all. Statistically, it is almost certain. So, I gave myself rules. Rule to make sure I

never betrayed myself and My Family. One, they had to be part of the Family, not just my lover. Everyone had to agree. We'd be together forever, after all."

To become someone, he thought of as a 'wife' was to be part of the Family in its entirety. Even if he could get away with it, easily too, Mikael would never cheat. To marry him, was to marry the entire Family.

You didn't have to have sex with anyone else, become their best friends, bend over backward to please them, or even be super close.

You just had to be willing to be part of their lives for the rest of Existence and have them willing to reciprocate the feeling.

"Two, I'd never seduce someone directly. If they wanted this, they had to know everything going in. No lies. Not even the slightest pretense to be someone and something I'm not."

Mikael was happy.

Why would he go out of his way to seduce someone? If anyone wanted to join, they'd be the ones who needed to carve out a niche for themselves to see if they fit.

"Finally, I set the hardest rule. The one I thought might never be achieved. I can't make an absurd claim to 'love everyone equally.' Everyone I love, I love in a different way because they are different people. I love my sons just as much as I love my daughters just as much as I love my wives, but each love is different. From Ismene's innocence to Scathach's bloodthirst. So, I gave myself the rule that, no matter what I felt for someone, I'd never even bring it up to the Family unless I was certain that those feelings were just as intense as those I felt for the others."

Em was openly weeping, her mascara running down her face in dark rivulets in a mirror of Emma's but without the intense sex as an excuse.

"You cleared all three rules seven years ago."

Em's heart stopped.

"Despite your best efforts, you are still based on My Emma. You look like her. You think like her. You act like her. You talk like her. The only difference was that you weren't Mine," Mikael's voice was gentle and sad, his eyes not wavering from hers. "For you alone, I created a fourth rule. When I look at you, I should only see you. Not My Emma. My Em."

Mikael opened his mind to Em…

…No.

As he leaned down to kiss her, Mikael opened his *soul* to Em, conveyed through his mind.

She was back.

For the very first time, Em was bathed in that Mad Love and knew it was for *her*.

It was everything she remembered it being and so much more.

Emma Frost had been Chosen and, in her hubris, threw herself into the mind of Great One in a desperate bid for some sort of control over her situation. She'd wanted freedom and saw Mikael as her jailer, instead of a fellow prisoner.

Emma Frost had died from the incomprehensible Mad Love and Emma had been born from that union.

Em remembered that moment, even years later.

What she didn't remember, couldn't remember because it never happened, was falling into that same mind after it had ascended.

The mind of a Tier 10 had killed Emma Frost.

The mind of a Tier 12 was so much more.

Mikael gave her just a peek at who- WHAT he was.

He was everywhere, everywhen, and everything.

Completely Free, he continued to spread and spread without limits. New multiverses became just a part of him faster than her mind could comprehend. He became their past, present and future.

Mikael was everything that was, had been, would be, could be, or would never be.

The End was there, another part of Existence, because The End existed.

The End wasn't there, because even Existence had an End.

Completely separate, yet intertwined, the two raced freely, encompassing all in their 'selves.'

An enumerable infinity within infinities within infinities that continued to expand to infinities were all 'Mikael.'

And it loved her.

Em felt Existence's love for her.

Felt every moment that would ever exist, every being that could ever exist, and every thing that had ever existed before, all united as 'Mikael.'

A man who refused to yield his madness until all of existence yielded to him instead.

And that will, that Existence, that madness, was all focused on what he Loved.

And Em was now counted among them.

… To call what happened to Em at that moment a climax would be wrong.

An orgasm was a physical experience brought on by arousal, mental and physical, brought to the point where the body reached a crescendo and flooded the brain with all sorts of pleasure chemicals.

Em did not experience a climax.

Em experienced ***rapture***.

A transcendental experience that elevated her entire being.

Love, pleasure, certainty, pride, joy, safety, and so much more.

To be His was to be fundamentally different than everything Not-His.

And, finally, after all these years, Em was His again.

When she opened her eyes, Em wasn't the slightest bit different physically than she had been a moment before.

Yet… The best way to put it into words someone could understand was that Em Frost was now a fundamental part of Existence, as eternal and sacrosanct as He was.

No more powerful than before, but the quality of her very being was so much greater, even if the quantity remained the same.

If one considered the Family each a part of Him, then Em had taken up one nineteenth of Existence. The rest remained undiminished, even as she joined them, for one could not divide infinity and expect the result to be lesser than infinity.

Mikael's eyes were all on her in this moment and Em knew that, even now, he couldn't really grasp what he had just done.

Well, no. That wasn't true. He literally could grasp it. He was Existence and she was as much part of Him as everything else. If he wished he could know exactly what this meant to her.

Yet even if he chose to live her life, he still wouldn't *get* it. It would be no different than reading a book to him. An incredibly intimate book that went into excruciating detail, but just… words.

To Mikeal, the act of loving someone was just a matter of emotions, no different than every other human out there. Because he chose to remain 'Mikael.'

To Em, the act of being Loved was a religious experience.

No matter how they tried, a god could not understand his priestess.

But that was alright.

All the god needed to do was to Love, for that was the greatest blessing the priestess could ever wish for.

"Welcome back," Mikael said, his lips quirked up in that teasing smirk of his. He was fully capable of being sincere, caring, and taking important moments seriously. But when those moments were over, he went back to his natural state. "Enjoy your trip?"

Em let out a content hum.

For the first time in over a decade, everything was right in the world.

Now, there was just one thing left to do.

Em stepped back, readjusted her blazer for the second time in as many minutes, enjoying the way his eyes focused on her exposed cleavage.

Her ice blue eyes met his through her rectangular glasses.

"You called for me Sir?"

His eyebrow quirked and laughter shone through his slit pupils at how quickly she had returned to their little role play.

Em felt no shame.

She had a decade long dry spell to break, and Mikael had set things up to push every one of her buttons. Now that she was His again, he had better be willing to give her the payoff she desperately needed.

"Yes," Mikael eventually said after chuckling lightly. He retook his seat behind her… his desk. "How long have you been working for me Em?"

"Years, Sir."

"In all that time, you've been the perfect secretary a man could ask for." Mikael nodded gravely. "Competent. Dutiful. Loyal. There has not been a task I've given you that you've failed at carrying out. You've gone above and beyond what could be expected."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Yet, in all the years since I've taken over this company, one can't deny the one task at which you've failed."

"Sir?"

"Do you need me to spell it out for you?" Mikael raised a brow imperiously at Em in disapproval. He waived his hand dismissively at the still kneeling Emma. "Even this useless whore understands without being told."

"You've succeeded as a secretary," Emma spoke for the first time in this little fantasy. Emma was playing the role of 'Emma Frost,' the previous CEO who'd been put in her place for her arrogance. Little more than a sex slave kept around as a prize to be paraded around and denigrated. "But you've failed your duty as his woman."

It was a wonderfully cathartic sight for Em, not even ruined by the fact that she would probably be playing the same role in future plays. It was only fair, after all.

Besides, with Emma's memories, Em had also dearly wished to see Mikael fuck another version of herself. The fact that it took over a decade to get the threesome with herself was a travesty that needed to be corrected… Vigorously.

(It does bear pointing out that, for all Emma, and Em by extension, hated the 'Emma Frost' first summoned to the Island and other versions of herself, they were also still 'Emma Frost.' That came with a certain ego, a belief that 'she' was the best fit for Mikael.

With as much as a kinky woman as she was even before Mikael, it bore little surprise that one of her greatest fantasies was to see another version of herself get absolutely mindbroken by her husband. It was the perfect ego booster, both because she saw 'herself'

as the most attractive woman and as an ego boost.

'Her' man was obviously better and any other 'Emma Frost's' man.)

Still, it wouldn't do to give the game away too soon. Mikael did enjoy the chase a bit.

"…Sir?" Em made sure her voice was just a touch hesitant, as if not understanding.

In the fake memories, Em had never been a target of sexual advances from Mikael. That was partly the reason she wore such slutty clothes, because she was trying to entice him to act.

After years of cleaning up the mess of all his other conquests, Em's fake memories told her he'd only need to wink at her, and she'd bend over her desk and spread her legs to be railed in front of everyone.

Yet nothing had happened until now.

Mikael sighed, as if in disappointment.

"I had such high hopes for you. Yet, even after all these years, you still don't understand."

"Understand what, Sir?"

Mikael shook his head and lightly waved his hand.

Emma rose to her feet.

Unlike Em, who had at least the pretense of modesty, Emma was 'dressed' to represent exactly what she was.

A sex slave.

If one squinted, one could almost imagine it was her outfit as the White Queen. The long white gloves and thick heeled boots that reached her knees were the same as was the white choker. She still wore the white corset… but that was where any resemblance ended.

The corset's lase ties still displayed her slim was completely open at the top to push up the pair of perfect tits. Not a stitch of fabric covered her breasts, and her pale nipples were on full display so everyone could see the metal piercings with tiny white dragons dangling with every twitch. Another of those little marks of servitude were fastened to the choker, making it resemble a collar.

Emma's groin was technically(?) covered. She wore the tiniest white panties, something to make even a G-string seem conservative, but not only were they white lace, but her arousal had turned them so sodden as to be see through.

Despite being dressed like the worst kind of slut, she carried herself with every ounce of pride and grace she did in the boardroom.

Even if she was a whore, Emma Frost was still the highest class of whore and you'd better respect that.

(It also helped that this wasn't even in the top 10 sluttiest things she'd ever worn. Even before Mikael and his… creativity in their sex lives, Emma Frost had a long history of being in an assortment of a-typical sexual situations, not the least of which was when she worked as a stripper for the Hellfire Club.

It also helped that she was, and Em by extension, extremely kinky.

Let me rephrase that:

In a Family which included: Yoruichi Shihouin, Wonder Woman, Glynda Goodwitch, Raven/Pride/Literally Satan, and MIKAEL!… Emma Frost was still the kinkiest one of the Family.

And now there were two of them.)

Emma didn't waste any time once she was near Em and the secretary didn't even try to resist as she was slammed forward, crashing into the sturdy desk and being forced to bend over it at a ninety-degree angle.

"You were waiting for him to fuck you, weren't you?" Emma snarled, forcing Em's head down onto the desk, her breasts spilling from her jacket and crushed flat against the hardwood. "Weren't you?!"

SMACK!

Em's entire body trembled as Emma's palm came down on her ass, her breasts pushed forward and now dangling off the edge of the desk within arm's reach of Mikael, who sat and watched apathetically.

It was as she stared into his eyes that Em answered.

"Yes." SMACK. "YES! I've been waiting for so long for you to fuck me." SMACK. "For you to bend me over my desk and ruin me with your big dick." SMACK. "Every morning, I woke up hoping you'd shove your cock down my throat." SMACK. "I've kept my ass clean and lubed every second just in case you wanted to bugger me in front of everyone." SMACK. "I've never touched a condom or a pill, hoping you'd want to creampie my desperate, needy pussy raw and fuck your bastard into me." SMACK. "But you never diiiiiIIIIIIIDDDDDD!"

Em was wailing by the end of her rant, her face red and eyes tearing slightly from the pain. Emma was not gentle with her spanks, and Em had to use her Aura to ensure she wasn't injured.

SMACK!

"This is why you're a failure," Emma spat out. "You kept waiting to be used. You should have begged." SMACK. "You should greet him every day by going to your knees under his desk." SMACK. "Every presentation you made should have been with his cock in you." SMACK. "Every time you answer the phone; it should be while bouncing on his lap."

SMACK. “A good secretary does her job. A good woman does it while making sure her man doesn’t need to do anything.” SMACK! “Not even ask for her holes!”

Every word that came out of Emma’s mouth seemed a revelation to Em, and her eyes were wide with understanding and regret by the end, as if the absurd statements were common sense she should have known all along.

Mikael just sat back and watched this one woman, two body play. Despite the impassive facade he kept up for the role play, he was terribly amused. He was certain that even if he didn’t do anything but sit there, the two women in front of him would keep at it for hours, riling each other up further and further.

But Mikael wasn’t the type to sit back, even if this was their fantasy.

…Largely their fantasy. He would admit to having a thing for women in uniform of all sorts, even slutty. Something about it demonstrating competence and his aversion to ‘damsels’ perhaps?

Either way, Secretary Em and White Queen Emma were definitely a feast for his eyes.

Besides, today was more about Em. Emma was being entirely too uppity for the play they were doing for her.

“Slut.”

With one word and a look, Emma immediately ceased spanking Em, released her hold, and fell to her knees with a solid THUNK.

“She’s right Sir,” Em remained on his desk, the look of deepest regret on her face contrasting with the way her breasts dangled over the edge. She even wiggled a bit to make them sway in front of his eyes. “I’ve been a failure as your woman. Please punish me.”

“I will,” Mikael assured her but deepened his tone in displeasure. “But the slave overstepped her authority. You’re my secretary. When you fail, it’s up to me to deal with you. She’s just a tool. A useful hole. You have control of her, not the other way around.”

Mikael almost wanted to sigh at how clearly denigrating ‘Emma Frost’ was getting Em off. Even Emma was practically vibrating, and he was sure he’d have to repeat this exact scenario later with the roles reversed.

Just because he saw the hatred they held towards ‘herself’ as absurd, didn’t mean she agreed and therapists were, ironically, the worst when it came to dealing with their own issues.

All he could do was hope the years would help them forgive, or at least forget, their ‘self-hatred.’

That and use it as fodder for debauched sex play.

Hey, if it worked, it worked.

Most fetishes came from repressed issues anyway.

"Slut." Mikael repeated. "Pay your mistress back."

Emma wasted no time lifting Em's skirt, clearly laying bare her white stockings and garter belt framing her toned legs and amazing ass. With an experienced hand, Emma pulled down the transparent panties and dove in.

Em let out a lewd moan as Emma's experienced tongue went to work on her. The excitement and foreplay already had her on a razor's edge and she came immediately, spasming and shuddering on his desk.

Emma didn't let up and Em had no intention of stopping either. In fact, she decided to take the next step.

"Please use me to your heart's content, Sir." Em lowered her head as far as it would go over the desk's edge and opened her mouth wide.

Mikael easily wheeled his chair forward, raised it slightly, and pulled down his pants to let his dick free.

As soon as it was within reach, Em was on it as if it was the last drop of water in the desert.

Em *slammed* herself onto his turgid cock hard enough that it would have seriously hurt a mortal woman. There wasn't even a beat of delay as she used her hands to pull his chair forward so she could swallow it down to the root. Her mouth formed a tight seal at his base, her throat slightly distended by his girth.

And she came *again*.

She wasn't usually this…excitable. This was the type of response he usually got from Ranni, who was still the most sensitive of his wives.

…Maybe he'd underestimated how horny Em was after no sex for over a decade. She had Emma's memories of the few months between his release and his Ascension, so it wasn't like 'she' hadn't had sex with him before.

To make up for the delay, Mikael decided to give her exactly what she wanted.

With one hand, he grabbed Em by her tightly bound hair and yanked her off his dick. She gasped for air, eyes unfocused as her chest heaved up and down, much to his delight.

Then Mikael slammed it back down, re-hilting himself in her throat.

GLRK GLRK GLRK.

Over and over, he skull fucked her, Em's glasses crashing into his hips but remaining both intact and in-place. It was the only part remained pristine.

The rest of her slowly deteriorated as he continued to use her mouth like a sex toy. Her make up was already smeared from her earlier tears now ran like a river and copious drool flowed from her lips. Her hair retained its bun, but its neatness was absolutely lost as

his hold on her head and control of her skull's movements forced it out of its careful styling.

Slurp. GARK! Slurp. GAK! Slurp. URK!

Every withdrawal was accompanied by a wet slurp as Em desperately tried to retain his dick in her mouth. Every thrust was accompanied by some form of chocking sound depending on the angle.

For a few minutes, Mikael kept his eyes on Em's. His face carefully neutral as hers looked up at him through her tears. There was a question in those blue eyes. A desperate need for validation.

To that pleading, Mikael just said:

"You'll do."

Then he went back to 'work,' pretending not to notice the way Em shuddered again at his word and Emma's continued her ministrations.

They remained like that for a while. Emma continued to please Em's desperate pussy with her mouth and fingers while Mikael continued to fuck her throat roughly with one hand, pretending to not pay any attention to the pleasure he was feeling or the arousing sights and sounds.

Then, as he continued his 'work,' the episode he was watching on his computer ended and moved onto the next.

(What? Did you expect him to do actual work in this sex fantasy?

Of course not!

He might be the ego of the being that assimilated everything into himself, but he was still Mikael. Of course he took the opportunity for a joke.

That's why, while having a threesome with Emma Frost and Emma Frost, he was watching an animated X-men show.)

Suddenly, as a familiar face appeared on the screen, Mikael had an idea.

Careful not to let either of the psychics see this thought, even as he let them read the rest of his mind, Mikael changed the relative time of this illusionary world.

Slurp.

In the second between having it and the next, Mikael had a series of long, serious discussions with every one of his wives, and even talked to the kids about it. This was not something that would happen just because of a sexually charged fantasy. This necessitated consideration, contemplation, and thorough discussion.

ACK!

Nobody was opposed, and most were even excited at the prospect, so he proceeded.

Slurp.

If this worked out, it could go a long way toward helping Emma and Em if not recover, then at least reconcile with her irrational hatred toward 'herself.'

URK!

After all, for all that she hated much about what 'Emma Frost' had done and who she was, there were a few aspects of her home world that she genuinely missed and still longed for.

Slurp.

So, Mikael let his idea slip through his mind as if it was an errant thought to evaluate their response.

-

Both women froze as they read his thoughts.

Even his continued use of Em's mouth did not draw a sound from her, showing how much of the sounds she put out were an exaggeration for effect.

Mikael pretended not to notice, though he did smile as he finally looked from his 'work' to the two of them.

"I believe I have the perfect punishment for your failure, Em."

That got her moving again.

Pop

"Of course, Sir," Em's throat was a bit hoarse, but it couldn't conceal the way her breath had picked up, knowing what was coming. "I am yours to use as you see fit. My mouth. My breasts. My ass. *My womb*."

Even if he couldn't read her like a book, the way she emphasized the last word made it perfectly clear how she felt on the subject.

Just as clear were Emma's own feelings as she stood from her crouch, face smeared with her twin's juices.

"What would you have me do, Sir?" There was a… yearning in her voice. It carried her arousal, of course, but also a hint of regret and loss.

If Em was ridding the high of sex after a decade of abstinence and wouldn't realize what this meant until later, then Emma was perfectly aware of the implications despite the haze of lust.

Mikael met her eyes and privately shared a conversation in a heartbeat.

Emma closed her eyes and responded with a simple sentence.

'I'll call my daughters Sophie and Irma.'

It was proof positive of His Emma and Em's hypocrisy.

Emma Frost was a stone-cold bitch. His Emma Frosts hated her. They hated her ex-husband. They hated Jean Grey. They hated Xavier. They hated so much of their old lives because it all led to the 'Emma Frost' that appeared on the Island and then in his Cell.

Yet, despite it all, despite 'dying' in the mind of a Great One and being reborn in its Mad Love, so much of what made her 'her' remained.

Including the love Emma Frost had for her Cuckoos, the clones created in her image to hold the Phoenix Force in her original world.

She'd buried both Esme and Sophie while alive and mourned the other three when she realized her world was destroyed, despite the fact she shouldn't care because they had been 'Emma Frost's' clones, not hers.

Mikael was still expanding endlessly, yet hadn't reached a limit. He hadn't even reached another 'Company' run section of the Multiverse. Despite finding various versions of their 'story' worlds, he still hadn't found any of his wives' original home worlds.

But so long as he was Free and Alive, he'd keep looking. It cost him nothing and would give his Family some much needed closure.

Until then, he'd have to settle for giving them a simple fraction of what they had lost and hoping it helped them in the long run.

Even if the idea came in the middle of a debauched sexual role play.

Then again, most of his best ideas did.

"Prepare her," Mikael ordered Emma. "When I'm done with her, you're next. Punishment for overstepping."

"Yes Sir. Thank you, Sir."

Without a pause, Emma picked Em up by her waist and spun her until the secretary was lying on her back, legs spread and facing him on his desk.

Mikael stood from his chair, not bothering to disrobe in the slightest as he knew how much they like seeing him in a suit, and lined up with Em's absolutely drenched sex.

"Ready to be mine?"

Both women tensed, eyes locked where his tip hovered less than an inch from her hole. Em didn't look away as she answered.

"I've always been."

With a grin, Mikael thrust.

Em… passed out.

Mikael paused for a heartbeat.

Of all responses, that wasn't the one he expected.

Em was a Diamond Dragon, like Emma. Even ignoring other aspects, like aura, her mutations, affinity with both forms of Haki, and general life experiences, she was still a

Tier 10, like the rest of his Family from imbibing his blood for years.

To pass out from one thrust…

Mikael grinned evilly.

He'd be holding this over her head for the rest of time.

With the most delicate of movements, he slowly withdrew himself until his tip was all that remained within his most recent wife.

Then he *slammed* himself forward.

"AAAAAAAHHHHhhhhhhhhnnnnnn~"

Em scream turned into a loud and wanton moan as she was awoken by his thrust. She was so loud that all the 'clients' in the waiting room no doubt heard as Mikael began to absolutely *rail* his slutty secretary.

"What a useless hole," Mikael resumed his act as he gave Em a disparaging look, hips continuing to move with his full force. "Passed out right away. You're tight and wet, so I guess it's not a total loss. But how am I supposed to use you in the future?"

"Ah'm sorry, nnnnn, Sir," Em' moaned out her words loudly to be overheard over the wet smack of flesh on flesh. With her white skirt bunched around her waist and her blazer buttoned under her breasts, not a part of her was concealed from his devouring eyes. She went so far as to thrust her chest higher from his desk, enormous tits bouncing with every slam of his hips against hers. "Use, mmmmmhhhhhhhhhh. Use me however you want. Even if… Even if I pass out. Or'm asleeeeep. Or working. HNNG. Or doing anyTHINGGGGGG!"

"If I wanted a sex slave to just lay there, I use any woman off the street. As my secretary, you need to be able to handle everything I have. Even if I want to get rough."

To prove his point, Mikael gave the woman a harsh slap across her breasts, making sure to hit her sensitive nipples with full force. Em spasmed in another orgasm at the sudden burst of sensation, accompanied by his dick's continual battering at her womb.

"Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry." Em babbled through her orgasm.

Mikael let himself savor the sight of seeing her come undone like this, knowing it would be a rare event. Usually, Emma was much more composed in bed and Em probably would be too once she was off this dry spell.

Speaking of his other wife…

"What are you doing!?" Mikael barked in displeasure at Emma.

"Ah?" For the first time since Mikael had penetrated her clone, Emma blinked.

Just because Em had been waiting years for this didn't mean Emma hadn't been waiting even longer to see her husband fuck another version of herself. The entire time

she'd had her eyes locked on where his dick dissipated into Em's pussy, her breath heaving deeply and a flush covering her pale skin.

"Why is every Emma Frost so useless," Mikael 'muttered' under his breath, loud enough to be heard by both of them.

In a move that seriously made Mikael consider if the pair had rehearsed it, both Em and Emma responded instantly.

""Because she's a power-hungry whore with delusions of adequacy.""

So surprised was Mikael by the unified and quick answer that Mikael paused his rough pounding of Em's abused snatch.

Externally, in a world beyond this little fantasy, Mikael created another iteration of himself that roared with laughter for a solid minute before dissipating.

That was one ice cold burn.

Internally, Mikael continued to play his role.

"Just. Because. You. Know." With every word forced from his grit teeth, Mikael slammed himself back in, enjoying the way Em gripped the desk for support to keep from sliding away. "Doesn't mean I'll forgive you."

To demonstrate his 'displeasure' Mikael gave Em's tits another harsh smack and let the momentum carry his hand to do the same to Emma's exposed breasts.

With the same hand, he reached over and grabbed a fistful of Emma's blonde locks, jerking her head down over the desk until it was pressed against Em's mound is his pounding dick.

"Get to work," he ordered.

Emma started licking Em's clit, occasionally giving his dick a sloppy kiss when the opportunity presented itself. One hand rose to roughly grasp Em's right breast, brutally twisting her nipple, while the other gently cupped his balls.

Speaking to both of them, he let his voice lower to his most dominating growl, knowing that it made his chest rumble in a way they loved. 'Dragon-like' his wives called it.

"I was going to make you each carry a child for your failures. Nine months internalizing your lesson. But since you two are 'power hungry whores with delusions of adequacy' then I need to make sure it goes through your thick heads." Mikael picked up the pace even more as he saw both women tense below him. "I'm giving you each twins. I hope you enjoy being huge and unable to move because of my children."

The logic of the punishment being somehow worse with two kids didn't really hold up, but it had been the plan anyway and Mikael was just creating a justification after the fact. Besides, fetishes and dirty talk didn't have to make sense for it to be hot.

And, for the two women, it was incredibly hot.

Even as Mikael began to cum deep into Em's waiting womb, the secretary was already babbling 'thank you, sir' and 'yes, sir' as she had her biggest orgasm yet.

But she wasn't idle either.

In a display that showed that her earlier unconsciousness was a one-time event, Em still managed to keep the wherewithal to use one hand to force Emma down on her clit while her other hand tore Emma's panties aside and cruelly thrust three fingers deep into her twin's cunt. That, plus Mikael's words, pushed Emma over the edge into her own climax.

For a moment, the trio just luxuriated in the feeling of release.

But Mikael was nowhere near done, and he wasn't alone in the feeling. All three had been waiting for this for far too long to stop after one round.

In a display of coordination without words only a telepath could achieve, Mikael and Em moved as one. With one hand harshly tugging her air and another half in her pussy, Emma was bodily lifted from the ground in a move that would have been excruciatingly painful for a regular woman.

Emma just moaned loudly as she was turned placed face down on her clone. Their breasts squished into each other and the little metal dragons rubbing against their nipples as Mikael withdrew himself from Em's creampied pussy and thrust his still engorged cock in between both mounds.

All three enjoyed the friction of his dick rubbing their clits as he pushed Emma's waist down to seal his dick between them at the angle of best coverage.

With his other hand, Mikael gave Emma's ass a harsh swat, enjoying the way it jiggled and reddened in response.

Stepping back slightly to get a good view of both his wives' legs, hips, asses, and weeping cunts, Mikael let a smile of pride and satisfaction come over him.

Then he was 'The CEO' again and lining himself up with Emma's unfertilized pussy.

"Your turn."

That was all the warning he gave before he slammed forward just as hard as he had with Em.

Emma didn't pass out, but that didn't mean she was unaffected. Fresh off an orgasm and knowing what was coming (pun intended) she was way more sensitive than usual, and her insides clamped down on him tightly, determined not to let him go until he gave her what she wanted.

Mikael slowly, tortuously slowly, and with enough strength to haul an iceberg, pulled himself out.

“No~” Emma moaned at the loss and began to beg to be filled once more. “Please. Please. I need it. Please, Sir. Please give this worthless slut your child. I’ll be good. The best mom. The best. Please.”

Her words, at once self-defeating and egotistical, were a mix of the roleplay and her genuine feelings. Ones Mikael couldn’t not respond to in a similar fashion.

As he thrust forward, he pressed her head down.

Catching the hint, Emma stopped babbling and locked lips with Em. Both women started to enthusiastically make out as he began to pick up the pace, their hands roaming each other’s bodies, pinching, petting and slapping in an erotic battle to get the other off first.

As they played with each other, Mikael leaned forward without slowing his pace, his arms braced on both sides of their heads to trap them in place. His larger body pressed them both down with his weight, practically wrapping around them both as he fucked Emma against Em.

To his most loyal, most treacherous, and most damaged wives, Mikael began to talk.

“Every day, for the rest of time,” he began in a low voice and both women froze, lips still locked. “You’re going to look your daughters in the eyes and you’re going to love them.” The CEO spoke, then Mikael whispered the rest gently. “You’re going to know every part of you, body, mind and soul belong to me. You’re going to love them because they’re proof that I love you. Until the End of Existence.”

They *broke*.

A low, keening wail echoed from their sealed lips and Mikael forced his own orgasm forward. He’d barely started with Emma, but the moment felt right.

Besides, it wasn’t like he would ever go soft if he didn’t want to. He still had hours before this little fantasy was finished.

Just as he had with Em, he ensured she’d be pregnant with twin daughters, each identical in appearance to the other three and their mothers. He also ensured they’d be born at the same times as the twins from the other women.

He stopped there, even though he could have molded them in a hundred other ways if he really wanted to recreate the Cuckoos.

Mikael was willing to help Emma and Em pay respect to the lost Stepford Cuckoos and hopefully heal the tiniest bit from the personality death he inflicted in The Cell, but he wouldn’t force his children to be anything else than what they wanted to be.

Their Elements, personalities, and desires would all be up to the girls themselves as they grew up. Even if they wanted to change their appearance in the future, to not be one of four ‘mini-me’s’ of their mothers, he’d help them do so.

Mikael loved his wives, but he loved his children just as much.

But they, like the children Artoria and Glynda asked for, were nine months away. Things had gone well with the Family's first four and, even with his oldest still being in their teens, the Family was ready for six more.

If nothing else, Medea would appreciate having more minions/pets/siblings/kittens to boss around.

Mikael took a moment to appreciate the fact that the second wave of children the Family would receive would all be blondes, before he refocused on the women below him.

Emma and Em had recovered in the brief break and returned to their physical exploration of each other's body.

…Did this count as incest? Mikael didn't know, but damned if it wasn't hot.

"You're having fun," he said with an exasperated shake of his head. Both froze and withdrew from the lip lock. Before either could start with 'Sorry Sir's' again, he withdrew from Emma and retook his seat behind the desk. "Come here, both of you. I'm not done."

Both versions of Emma Frost got off the desk, uncaring for their nudity or that they were… dripping, and rested on their knees beside him.

"Get me slicker," Mikael ordered with a gesture to his still erect dick. "I have two more holes to use. Then I'll need to get some actual work done. You'll remain here but if I have to pay attention to you, you've failed."

""Yes, Sir.""

Emma and Em pressed their enormous breasts together around his dick, trapping it in a wonderfully tight embrace. Both opened their mouths, drooling on his tip, before they began to move their tits up and down.

Mikael noticed the way they bit their lips and realized that the little nipple piercings with stylized dragons he'd created for this play were making their nipples, already delicate and responsive, way more sensitive. Perhaps something to consider in the long term, or to try with his other wives.

Still, as the twins alternated between making out over his dick and giving it more saliva, Em finally had a moment of clarity to send a psychic message.

'Thank you.' Her mental voice was subdued despite her lewd tit-job. 'For waiting. For this… dream. For Phoebe and Celeste. For Choosing *me*.'

Mikael didn't need to be a psychic to know that, if either woman had another daughter, they'd name her Esme after the last Cuckoo.

Nor did he need to read Em's mind to know she'd battled with her identity as a copy of Emma for the last decade. So, he simply answered the best way he could.

'Of course I'd do everything for you. You're my wife. In all of Existence, there are

countless ‘Emma Frosts.’ Only two are Mine. And only one is *you*.’

Em’s eyes closed, even as she kept smearing saliva along his dick, and Mikael swore he saw a weight lift from her soul.

A Greater part of him, Existence, passed on the information that Em’s Semblance had changed.

No longer was her soul just a copy of Emma’s delivered by The Company as a replacement.

Mikael let himself enjoy the physical pleasure and Love of the moment.

Em, of course, had to push the envelope though.

‘I can’t believe you made me clean up after an illusion of Jean Grey of all people,’ she bitched good naturally. ‘You know I hate her. You’re a complete bastard.’

‘That wasn’t an illusion,’ Mikael responded with a smirk. Em froze, mouth half lolling open. ‘That was the Phoenix. Melina finally managed to create a separate body for it.’

‘…A complete bastard!’ Em responded, forcing an image of watching Jean Grey/ Phoenix getting absolutely demolished in his sex dungeon.

Mikael laughed. Fulfill one of her fantasies and she immediately focuses on another one. Emma Frost was such a high maintenance woman.

But he wouldn’t have her any other way.

It was hours later that Em emerged from his office.

“Miss Braddock?” She said, adjusting her glasses and dabbing a bit of cum from her lips. “The boss will see you now.”

The other ‘woman’ (this one an actual illusion) just stared at Em in shock as she retook her seat at her desk.

With her tits out, her skirt gone, and her wobbly steps on her heels, it was clear that Em had been absolutely destroyed. Not an inch of her wasn’t covered in cum and more oozed out of her well used cunt and ass with every step.

Em wore it like a crown as she retook her seat behind her desk and resumed her delayed work.

Even if these weren’t just illusions created for the express purpose of turning her on, Em wouldn’t have cared. She would have walked through the original Frost Pharmaceuticals just as she was with her head held high.

Why should she be ashamed?

This all came from Mikael, from Existence. Her god.

Her husband.

Her state was just proof Em was ***His.***

Author's Note:

Here we go, the last of the 'wives' lewd chapters. Not sure if I'll do others in the future or not, but there was no way I was leaving Emma, and Em by extension, out of their own little sexcapades.

To anyone who knows here character, even in the comics, it should be unsurprising how much of an absolute degenerate Emma Frost is, taken to the extreme when paired with someone like Mikael who is not only willing, but able to play with her fetishes in a safe, consensual environment.

Of course the chapter wasn't all blowjobs and orgasms, being not only 10k words long. I don't seem to be able to leave the characters and the plot at the door when I write these. I know this is a bit of a problem to those who want to... enjoy such chapters, but I've decided to not change it. Sex can be a wonderful tool in characterization, both in how characters interact with each other before/during/after it, but also in what turns them on or off.

This chapter, in specific, I wanted to not only touch on Mikael's approach to future relationships, but also Emma, and Em's, troubles. Mikael would never be the 'collect them all' type of fanfiction protagonist, but at the same time he recognizes that to say he'll never be with anyone else is almost certainly impossible, given the timescale he's working on. Instituting his rules, I think, would be his way of ensuring he never 'cheats' on those he does love, and prevents a sort of cascade of lovers. Even if he can be with all of them at all times, removing a big reason why he 'limited' himself to ten in the initial catalogue, he wants to keep 'The Family' together, rather than reduce it to a 'Harem.' He doesn't want to lose the dynamic that grew because of the original ten trapped on the Island without him.

Em, by dint of arriving at the end of the fic, didn't really get any room to breathe. I tried to hint at it in the last SS, but it would surely mess anyone up to realize you are not who you think you are. Like a suprecharged clone situation. Only Em has it worse because she's based off of Emma who is based off of Emma Frost. Combine Emma's... Emmaness with knowledge that Mikael doesn't, but can't love her the way he does His Emma, and that leads to a hard dynamic. I tried to explore a bit how I think that character would react, but there was only so much I could do in one chapter.

That all said, this will be the last SS at least for a while. I'm going back to working on my next work with full focus and probably won't be posting for another few months. Tentative release schedule is early summer. I might have other SS or one shots between now and then, but you shouldn't count on it.

I'll see you all next time.

Omakes

OMAKE I: THE WOMAN-WHO-KNEW-MEMES by Himera

“Truly, the Amity Colosseum was a miracle of engineering. Without any embellishment, he was a real achievement of the human genius of the Remnant, who managed to lift many thousands of tons of metal into the air. Perhaps only the Atlas capital soaring in the sky could compete with him.

As with any such symbol, the shell had to correspond to the status, so it is not surprising that not only outstanding builders and engineers were involved in the creation of the Colosseum, but also designers capable of giving it an outstanding appearance. It was made of the highest quality concrete and steel, was decorated with the best exotic materials brought from all over the world. From the boarding platforms and ticket offices to the spectator seats and VIP boxes for the elite, the Colosseum was beautiful in everything, from whatever side you look at it. Especially noteworthy was the most complex mechanical system that allows you to customize the diverse terrain and landscape of the arena.

But here, in the depths of the premises, where technical passages and corridors «for staff» intertwined, little remained of this beauty. The lighting was sterile and sparse, the decorative panels were replaced by painted concrete, and all the free space was occupied by communications: ventilation ducts, cables and various pipes. Instead of the hubbub of the crowd and pleasant music, the clicking of mechanisms, the rustle of air conditioners and the annoying buzz of levitation systems filled the space.

However, Mercury Black cared very little about all this. He didn't come here to admire the views and the pretentious show, but to do the job assigned to him. While Cinder was preparing for a «revealing» performance, and Emerald was covering for the absence of companions, the mercenary himself had to go down into the tunnels, penetrate into the reactor room, where he was supposed to mine the engines of the Colosseum.

After all, it won't collapse on the city by itself, right?

Therefore, Mercury confidently but slowly moved towards his goal. Metal soles clattered on the floor covering, attentive eyes tenaciously examined the surroundings, and the right hand did not leave the pistol holster. When he came to the next fork, he stopped, looked around again, inserted the decoder into the combination lock, and then, after waiting for a characteristic signal, entered the door that opened. If the schematics received from Watts did not lie, there was only one transition and two turns left from here to the

reactor compartment.

It's nice when everything goes right.

The mercenary was about to move on when he was stopped by a melodious female voice.

«Are you in a hurry somewhere, Mr. Black?»

Glynda Goodwitch, a teacher of the combat training course, blocked his path. A tall blonde in stylish clothes stood a few meters away from Mercury, effectively crossing her arms under her lush breasts. Intelligent green eyes looked at the uninvited guest attentively and sternly, full lips were discontentedly curved; a weapon, a cavalry stack, was currently resting on her belt.

The woman in front of him was confident, strong... and incredibly arrogant. This should have been taken full advantage of.

«Oh, Miss Goody!» Mercury smiled impudently and raised his hands in a conciliatory manner, demonstrating the absence of weapons in them. «I got a little lost here. I wanted to go to the bathroom, but something didn't work out».

«Looking for a bathroom?» The woman raised an eyebrow skeptically. «Here? In a technical passageway closed to visitors and staff below the second level of admission?»

«Well, you know how it is». He shrugged, taking a few steps toward me. «First you turn the wrong way, and now you're already there... in some hole!»

In the end, his patience failed him, and Mercury could not hold the mask to the end. Having already finished speaking, he rushed from his seat, jumping up to the surprised woman with all possible haste. There was a pop of spent dust charge in the air, after which the mechanical knee, accelerated by the engine, crashed into Goodwich's stomach.

Mercury was an experienced bounty hunter and therefore knew several important rules necessary for any person in his profession. The first rule is that the aura does not protect the hunter absolutely, and with proper skill it can be overcome. Just as a bulletproof vest stops bullets, but does not extinguish kinetic energy at all, so this remarkable ability does not save from a very strong attack concentrated on a small area. The main thing is to put all the available forces into it and choose the right moment to strike.

The second rule is that physiology is physiology. Regardless of the presence of an aura, the human body of a person is heterogeneous and not equally well protected everywhere. Heart, lungs, neck and groin – these are the priority targets for the attack. And, of course, the stomach. With a successful hit, even an experienced hunter may be forced to spit out his insides to the ground.

Mercury was even sorry to spoil this sexy teacher.

But for some reason, Goodwitch hasn't gone bad at all. She didn't even move. She only swayed slightly, and then with a reciprocal movement threw Mercury away from her, forcing him to crash into the door. Not a drop of pain appeared on the proud and thoroughbred face of the blonde, only her lips curled contemptuously, and an unkind look ran through her glasses.

It was unexpected, the guy admitted, but at the same time not quite. «Glynda Goodwitch» was a big name that spoke better than any evidence about the strength of its owner. If the huntress not only managed to live to adulthood, but also become recognizable by people like Mercury, it meant that she definitely had a couple of trump cards up her sleeve. What was it, the strengthening of the aura? Or the virtuoso use of telekinesis? No matter, one way or another, it was not worth underestimating this arrogant woman.

«Did you learn it in your cushy Beacon Academy?» The mercenary threw a joke, choosing an angle for an attack.

«No, a friend taught me». The huntress replied, not moving from her place. She didn't seem to notice Mercury's efforts, continuing to look at him as if he were a cockroach. «It could have been better if it weren't for other responsibilities. I'm not like those damn lazy girls».

This unflappable comment suddenly enraged the guy very much, forcing him to attack ahead of time. But this attempt was not crowned with success. Easily dodging his feint, Goodwitch grabbed the killer by the neck with one hand, and then threw him to the other end of the corridor, slamming him into the concrete wall with all her might.

Fearing to miss another blow, Mercury immediately got out of the funnel and took a defensive stance.

«What the hell are you!?» he shouted, giving vent to boiling anger.

«Why don't you stick around and find out?»

This time, the mercenary waited a few seconds, assessing the woman slowly approaching him. Okay, if it didn't work out to kill her right away, then it's worth trying a different approach. Nodding to his own conclusions, Mercury pushed off from the wall and rushed forward to explode into a whirlwind of feints and punches.

It doesn't matter that she's some kind of super-huntress capable of shrugging off his best punches. Rule number three – aura ends for all fighters. Little by little, bit by bit, but the enemy can be exhausted by simply exhausting his strength, so instead of one decisive attack, the mercenary brought down dozens of them on a flat female stomach.

He had never worked so hard before, either in the training hall or during the execution of contracts. He squeezed everything out of himself, mercilessly beating the

elastic flesh, pounding with his fists on the impudent teacher. His teeth were grinding with tension, and his hands seemed to be blurring in the air, leaving smeared traces. His breathing became heavy, confused, but Mercury continued to beat, beat and beat ... and all to no avail.

At some point, having exhausted his stamina, the mercenary was forced to break the distance. Looking incredulously at the enemy, he only shook his brush wearily, feeling his muscles ache with pain. He did it, he saw it, but still couldn't believe that all his attacks didn't cause any harm.

«Why won't you die?» It came out of his mouth against his will.

Goodwitch just grinned and grabbed the hem of her snow-white blouse with her hands, mercilessly tearing it. Scraps of fabric flew into the air, revealing flawless female body. Her large and firm breasts barely fit in a lacy black bra, her flat stomach was covered with prominent muscles, and the reflections of electric lamps seductively played on her smooth velvet skin. But there was not a single bruise or scratch on this entire splendor, as if the body of his mistress had not been beaten for several minutes in a row.

Mercury's eyes widened in amazement. He was sure that his efforts could harm himself Ironwood.

As if reading his thoughts, the blonde smiled indulgently and put her hand to her elastic chest. And where her palm touched the sexy body, a black metallic spot suddenly appeared, spreading rapidly across the skin, moving towards her right hand.

«Nanomachines, son!» A graceful fist smashed into the floor, forcing him to crouch a few inches, sending a cloud of dust into the air. «You can't hurt me, Black!»

Mercury stepped back against his will, feeling his intuition warn him. It looks like it won't be as easy as he thought at first.

OMAKE II: BAD END 1 - CARELESS SUMMONS by TheCenterAct

“She didn’t mean to summon him.

Really, she did not.

But here he was, in front of her. Confronting her. She tried to explain it to him, her reasons for his circumstances, the purpose behind it all. But he wouldn’t hear of it.

They talked at length. Well, she did, she tried everything on her power to persuade him to see her perspective. And yet, as she went on, she knew that this could not move him. And it seemed that nothing would, so in the end, she tried one last gambit.

“It seems like nothing will truly make you see how I see, and I am greatly saddened by that fact. But know this your chosen companions are there to help you, not to hinder, listen to them, for they will guide you.”

He seemed to hear nothing of it, but when she stole another glance at him, he looked like he had realized something, though no matter how she probed, he wouldn’t answer her. It was only after a moment that she saw what she had done, and she cursed inwardly. There was the only thing he seemed to hear about his women, and it was something she wouldn’t have wanted for him to realize.

There was more silence. Her, hesitant to speak and incriminate herself more. Him, mulling over his discovery in painful contemplation.

Finally, he seemed to have come to a decision, he was about to turn his back on her, intent on doing something. That thing would no doubt be detrimental to her plans, she couldn’t allow that.

“Wait!”

He stopped then, he didn’t turn back, but his head was tilted towards her. No longer did he speak, though it was clear he was waiting for her next words. And yet, even though she called out for him, she had none. Even for all her power and might, she was paralyzed, stuck in a moment in time. She couldn’t find the words.

Until finally… he turned back, and left.

Her hands stretched out to him, but still could not speak. At this moment, she experienced something like never before.

‘What a this strange feeling… this is… hopelessness… huh…’

‘…’

‘I hate it.’

******

The next time she saw him in the flesh, he stood above a multitude of corpses, not just those of creatures, but of whole Worlds. His companies were arrayed behind him as he confronted her, they looked haggard, just like him. But his eyes, when she looked at them, she only saw one thing.

Resentment.

He did not speak, but as she'd seen, his eyes told her more than he could ever say.

Finally, she could bear the silence no longer, she opened her more and spoke.

"I… am sorry."

"…"

"I know that my apologies are oh no use to you, but still, I can only repent in what I put you through. That was the only thing I could do, to get you for myself. Please, hear out my words… please…"

"…"

And yet, he only gazed at her impassively, and her pleas feel on deaf ears. His women stood by the side, seemingly with no reaction. She found that strange, as they usually were much more expressive than that, but she dismissed it after a moment's thought, there were more important things here.

"Please listen to what I have to say, I promise you, all will be right once you hear what I have to say."

"…"

"…"

He scrutinized her face, looking at her seemingly puzzling her out. But finally, after a long moment of silence, he spoke.

"Okay."

"!"

She couldn't help but jump. She couldn't believe it, he really had spoken, and he seemed to have calmed down now as well. His figure relaxed during the period of silence. When she realized that, a spark of relief bubbled from within her chest, and a smile involuntarily showed up on her face. And so with a cheer in her voice, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Very good, now listen and-"

Pitch black. Darkness. The last thing she saw was his dull and empty eyes, and the last thing she thought was a single question.

'… since when did his Life go out?'

******

**

Silent, the World was silent, and everything within was also silent.

No one spoke for a long time. Then, his body twitched. He jerked, shivered, and then seemed to convulsed. Then he stilled.

With a drawn out sigh, he suddenly spoke.

"Now, it's time for you all to go."

"…"

No one responded, and he sighed again.

"Alright… this is… goodbye."

It was only then that they finally had a reaction. Some twitched, a few fingers curled, and many mouths opened. And yet no actions occurred. Unheeding of their strangeness, he spoke out his Order.

"By the power of my command seals, I command you, pass on."

A blinding light erupted from their forms, and there was a cacophony of seeming heavenly choruses sounded from within it. It was at this point that they all finally found the strength to break through their bondage. As one, they screamed one final plea to him.

"NO, PLEASE!"

But it was of no use. There was a final flash of a scintillating shine, then finally… silence.

The world was once more calm, exceedingly so. With nary a sound to be heard, it was obvious when the forlorn sigh resounded.

"Haaaaa… Finally."

He looked to the blackened skies above him, Ash drifted down with obstruction, as even the wind had been slain in the conflict between powerful forces. Yet nonetheless, he prevailed. He deafeted any and all who challenged him. He slew all those who opposed him. He sacrificed everything in his grasp. And in the end, all of that, all the fights, all the fights, and all the sacrifice. All these things was for one thing, and one thing only… ***FREEDOM***.

"And now, I finally have it."

"…"

"…"

"…"

"No one will take it away from me… ***my precious*** **freedom**."

The sounds of strange laughter rang out through the barren land. No being was there to witness the unusual sight. Nor were there any to realize what exactly was happening to the being at the center of it all. And that was just the way he liked it.

“Heheheheheheheheheeee-“

The sound faded away like ashes to the wind. Never to be seen or heard of ever again.

OMAKE III: HOME

“Tsunade-sama. Tsunade-sama. Wake up Tsunade-sama.”

“Mrgl,” Tsunade slurred unintelligibly as she tried to waive off the voice.

Sleep good.

Awake bad.

“Tsunade-sama,” the voice sighed in exasperation before firming up. “Oh look, someone found your secret stash.”

“YORUICHI!!” Tsunade roared as she jumped from her chair, fist extended to pound that thieving cat.

Did the shinigami not understand how hard she had worked to get Scathach to make sake instead of her usual brew? The only way Yoruichi would get her hands on it was if it was over Tsunade’s cooling corpse… Or if she had something equal to trade.

Like the next Date Day.

Tsunade blinked as her vision swam back into focus.

That wasn’t Yoruichi.

“Shizune?” Tsunade croaked in confusion.

Only long familiarity with the Senju had saved the girl’s life, having stepped back before the former Hokage had awoken. Even then, Tsunade’s fist had stopped less than an inch from the black-haired girl’s face.

“Who’s Yoruichi?” To her credit, Shizune seemed utterly unfazed by her almost murder at her teacher’s hand.

Tonton, the miniature pig she carried in her arms, was a different story. It squealed and squirmed, honking and snorting in fear, then anger at Tsunade.

“Shizune?” Tsunade asked again. Then her face firmed, and she stirred her chakra. “Kai!” She called as she did the seal of release.

The Defences should protect her from genjutsu and other illusions directly on her, but old habits died hard.

“Tsunade-sama?” The thing pretending to be her former protegee said, looking worried.

Tsunade didn’t give them a chance to do anything, moving with her full speed to grab the impostor and run her diagnostic jutsu over them in less than a second. Whatever method they were using would not escape her senses.

Only… Tsunade sensed nothing off. No trace of foreign chakra, unfamiliar techniques, or different DNA.

She had scanned Shizune more times than probably anyone else in her life, just by virtue of being her teacher and the long time spent together, and Tsunade could say, with one hundred percent certainty, that this was her protegee.

This was impossible because Shizune was dead, and her world was lost, so not even her husband could bring her back.

Was Tsunade in another world? How had she come here? Where was everyone?

“Tsunade-sama?” Shizune asked again, now looking at the older woman with genuine concern. “Are you all right? What is wrong?”

Tsunade tried to reach out to Mikael, to Life, but came up empty.

Nature chakra did not respond to her. She could not shape wood. Her Haki was silent, and Aura did not glow within her.

In one final desperate attempt, Tsunade tried to transform. Without Wood Release, she couldn’t become the Female Titan, but she was still a Dragon of Life. She could still become the monolith of wood and power.

Only she couldn’t.

Tsunade was, for all intents and purposes, a regular, if powerful, Kunoichi again.

Shizune panicked as her mentor fell to her knees, tears streaming from her face.

“Tsunade-sama!?”

*

A dream.

That’s what Shizune said.

A product of binge drinking for three days straight and sleeping off the hangover.

Tsunade hadn’t fallen fighting Madara. Her world hadn’t been destroyed while she lay there, unconscious or dead.

Instead, the Fourth Shinobi World War had escalated after she and the other Kage had been unconscious. Including, but not limited to, the former Hokage coming back from the dead, the Juubi being fully resurrected, Madara being betrayed, and the Mother of Chakra, Kaguya, being an alien bent on reclaiming all the chakra in the world.

Naruto, with the aid of his team, had defeated her and freed everyone from the eternal illusion that kept them trapped while they were sucked dry.

That had been years ago.

Now, the world was relatively peaceful for the first time in… ever, really.

Tsunade was no longer Hokage and spent her time in retirement drinking, occasionally working at the hospital when the mood struck her, and gambling her way across the Elemental Nations.

As Shizune spoke, the memories started coming back to Tsunade.

Helping grow Naruto a new arm, appointing Kakashi Hokage until Naruto was ready, and even a vague memory of her time trapped in the Infinite Tsukiyomi.

Tsunade even remembered the last few days of drinking, a celebration of her return to Konoha after her most recent 'diplomatic trip (read: carousing across the land.)'

Tsunade wandered through the streets of Konoha, greeted everywhere by smiling faces and laughter. Everyone knew her name and her face, and they were all overjoyed to see her return.

She looked to the mountain and saw the new face upon it beside hers.

The sky was clear and beautiful.

No Chill Moon dominated the horizon, inlaid with rings of gold. A constant of existence so omnipresent was it in her life that Tsunade only noticed when it was gone.

The sky looked barren without it.

It had all been a dream.

"Baa-chan!" Naruto waved excitedly as he caught sight of her, running up to her while her second student followed behind at a more sedate pace, no less pleased to see her mentor.

"Tsunade-sama," Sakura said warmly, though with a note of amusement. "How are you doing today? Not too hungover, are you?"

Tsunade stared at the pair.

"Need some of Kurama's chakra," Naruto asked, hand extended and glowing slightly. "That helped Sai when Ino got him drunk."

Shizune, Sakura, and Naruto had been the ones Tsunade had grieved for the most, yet here they were.

They were alive.

They were happy.

"Baa-chan?" Naruto asked, bandage-wrapped arm falling as he looked at her, brow furrowing.

"It's nothing," Tsunade said with a shake of her head and pulled them both into a tight hug in a move that surprised the younger ninja. "It's nothing."

"It's not," Sakura said with a frown as she pulled away slightly from the hug to look over her mentor. "You didn't even try to hit Naruto for calling you 'Baa-chan.'" "Hey!" "It must be serious."

Tsunade wondered what her face looked like that these two immediately knew of her internal turmoil.

Tsunade should be happy.

Her village and her students were still alive. Her world wasn't destroyed.

It had all been a long dream.

She should be happy.

Yet she wasn't.

There was no Yoruichi around to quarrel with, drink with, or reminisce with.

Tsunade would never again be able to spend a day reading in quiet company with Robin or engage in a week-long sparring session with Artoria as they really let loose without restraint.

Medea would never again fret about the kitchen and her workshop, dedicating enormous time and effort to projects for the rest of the Family.

Raven was no longer a constant presence in her shadow, a quiet yet reassuring friend to have her back.

Never again would Tsunade be able to join Glynda in teaching students and seeing strange and wondrous children grow under their tutelage.

Tsunade would never hear Diana and Emma's constant arguments over righteous morality versus cynical pragmatism.

She could not subtly tease Ranni as the goddess tried to maintain a placid face, unaware she was the most expressive of the Family in her real body.

No Priscilla to mentor. No Scathach to fight over which booze was best. No Melina to interject a witty snark to deflate their husband's ego. There was no fat cat, leading four dragons searching for food, conquest, food, mischief, and food.

Tsunade would never again feel the omnipresent connection to her husband, feel his power wrap around her in constant reassurance that he was there.

That she was loved.

"No," Tsunade eventually said. "I am not all right."

Tsunade would never see her sons again.

Never hear their rambunctious antics as the twins fought, pranked and laughed in that perfect combination of Mikael's sense of humour and Tsunade's own hotheadedness from her youth that she pretended annoyed her but secretly loved.

Never see them grow up, become men and start their own families.

"What happened?" Sakura asked.

Shinobi were survivors, and Tsunade was the greatest Kunoichi to have ever lived.

A dream would not defeat her.

However, it did leave her with a greater appreciation for all those who had experienced Heartbreak in her dream.

"A long dream," Tsunade shook her head. "Nothing that you can help with."

Naruto and Sakura shared a look but decided to let her keep her secrets for the

moment and instead regale the former Hokage about what had happened in Konaha in her absence.

Tsunade let them but could not bring herself to forget that dream.

Even if it had never really happened, it had been real to her.

She'd survive.

That was the one thing Tsunade Senju always did.

What was one more tragedy to carry with her?

So, she tried to lose herself in Konoha's day-to-day life. She worked at the hospital, spent time with her students, and occasionally aided Naruto with his training.

Days passed. Weeks. Months.

The pain did not pass.

Tsunade never forgot the dream. It remained crystal in her mind as if her soul rejected the idea of living a different life.

She tried drinking once.

And only once.

Then Tsunade was back to drowning herself in work.

Shinobi were survivors, but they were also human.

Something had to give.

It would be either Tsunade or the world itself.

Tsunade would never bet on herself in that case. She knew her own limits. She was not Mikael and could not break worlds from sheer stubbornness. Her money was on her own failure.

Tsunade was always a terrible gambler.

The crack came in the most unexpected way.

The moon, the prison in which Kaguya was trapped, was breaking apart and falling to the Earth.

Tsunade trusted Naruto to handle the crisis and instead focused on evacuating civilians.

She didn't understand why people seemed so in awe of Naruto's power level or didn't think he could pull it off after everything he had done.

Not only was he the same brat she had challenged to learn the Rasengan, but compared to the things Tsunade had experienced in her dream, it was hard to consider a moon a viable threat.

That was something Tsunade struggled with on a daily basis.

It was hard to connect with others when she dreamed (knew) of so much more out there.

Tsunade had seen things and fought things that made Biju look like barnyard animals. She had seen enough death to make all Shinobi World Wars look like a playground fight.

More people had died on Heartbreak than were currently in the entire Land of Fire.

Sure, Naruto was powerful, but Mikael had destroyed planetary bodies larger by crashing into them on accident when he first flew to Earth.

Ranni liked to throw condensed moons at people, and Robin could make enough bodies to carry one if she had enough time.

If Tsunade was still a Dragon of Life, she could have handled it and the Ootsutsuki by herself.

But she wasn't, Tsunade reminded herself for the millionth time.

It had been a dream.

Now, she was just the former Hokage.

So, she went about saving civilian lives and trusting Naruto to handle the issue.

Which he did. Easily.

So easily that Tsunade felt like she had wasted time helping evacuate when nobody had been hurt in the first place.

Still, she needed to check up on the boy, Hinata, and Hanabi. Who knows what kind of after-effects their battle on the moon had caused?

Asking around, it seemed like her students had the same thought as Sakura had led everyone to the hospital for a checkup.

As Tsunade approached the room Hinata and Naruto were in, she got her first hint of something off.

Hanabi was outside the door to the room, sitting in a chair for visitors, with a shell-shocked look on her face.

"Hanabi?" Tsunade asked, looking the girl over. Despite her recent kidnapping, she looked pristine, not a hair out of place. The former Hokage could hear voices in the room but couldn't make out the words. Naruto's fox-like laugh and Sakura's shouts were unmistakable, however, so she wasn't worried. "What is wrong?"

"Tsunade-sama?" The young Hyuuga looked at the older medic, eyes still wide. Which wasn't that rare for a Hyuuga, but the flush in the young lady's cheeks and the look in her normally placid eyes were not. "Tsunade-sama?"

"Yes," Tsunade said, stepping closer and running her diagnostic jutsu over the girl. Was she in shock? If so, why was Sakura or Shizune not tending to her? "I am here. You're safe now."

"Tsunade-same," Hanabi asked, her voice firming and her eyes losing their glassy look. "How do you seduce a man?"

To borrow one of Mikael's favourite phrases:

Wat?

"What?" Tsunade deadpanned. Had Naruto seduced both sisters with his rescue?

Good for him, but keep her out of it. Her luck with love was infamous.

And there was a bit of a problem with Hanabi having a crush on Naruto.

"A man," Hanabi repeated, standing from her seat and looking at the older woman.

Tsunade could see flames of determination in her eyes.

Who let Lee near the genin again?

Didn't they have a law against that?

"How do you make a man fall in love with you?"

"You're fourteen," Tsunade deadpanned. "Naruto is too old for you. Grow up a bit before thinking of love."

Yes, Tsunade and many other fresh genin started searching for young romantic partners.

That didn't stop them all from regretting it as they grew up.

No twelve-year-old makes good decisions about love.

"Naruto?" Hanabi wrinkled her nose. "No. Onee-sama is with him. They just kissed, and I am not interested in someone so immature."

Huh.

"Then who are you talking about?" Tsunade asked.

"A man," Hanabi sighed dreamily. "Powerful. Determined. Mature. He rescued us, fixed the moon and brought us home. You should have seen him Tsunade-sama. It was… I can't describe it. Some of the Jutsu he used, the way he took apart that Ootsutsuki… It was almost magical."

"Who is this man?" Tsunade asked with a frown.

Someone powerful enough to rescue Hanabi would definitely be someone they wanted on their side.

Also, young Kunoichi's appreciation for more mature male partners wasn't rare.

It was almost as if child soldiers had issues, but that couldn't be right.

"My future husband," Hanabi said with determination. "The Hyuuga need a man like that if we are to shake off the mistakes of the past. Powerful yet gentle. Someone who knows how to be serious, unlike Onee-sama's man-child."

"Right," Tsunade drawled. "He's in there, then?"

"Hai," Hanabi nodded seriously. "He claimed to need to speak with Shizune-san. While he does that, please teach me how to seduce a man."

"Not a chance," Tsunade snorted out a laugh as she rounded to the hospital room

reserved for confidential patients.

Hanabi didn't even have a chance to beg some more before Tsunade stepped through, closing the door behind her quickly.

Tsunade knew a fangirl when she saw one.

It was a shame another Kunoichi was lost to the disease, but there were some things even Tsunade couldn't cure.

"You do not understand the sheer awesomeness of Orange," Naruto ranted from the medical bed while Sakura looked him over with a long, suffering look. Hinata sat demurely beside him while he spoke passionately to another medical bed, half hidden by privacy curtains. "Not only is the sun orange, which makes it the best, but it doesn't rhyme with anything, so it is unique. And, if you wear orange and still sneak up on people, it proves you are the best ninja ever."

Tsunade let out a sigh as she caught Sakura's eyes. They had heard Naruto's arguments for the terrible colour a dozen times.

Nothing they said or did would change his mind.

Or his horrid fashion sense.

"I'm not saying orange doesn't have its place."

The world froze.

"But wearing bright colours tends to piss off enemies. They feel insulted. Like you aren't taking them seriously."

"So?" Naruto asked petulantly, arms crossing defensively.

"So," the hidden voice drawled with humour. "If you are going to piss people off, don't do it halfway. Orange is good, but you can do better. Let's add some bright flowers or plants, maybe red or pink. A cartoon animal or two would work as well. Maybe a shirt that just says 'boobs' or something like it. We throw in some white and blue to really make it pop, and I promise you, nobody will ever be able to ignore you again."

"Ah," Shizune said, emerging from the other side of the curtained bed with a tray and looking at Tsunade with a smile. "Tsunade-sama. We were just talking about you."

Tsunade heard none of it. Saw none of it.

Not her students, not the way Hinata had paled at the implications of seeing Naruto dressing as suggested or the way the future Hokage was seriously considering the man's advice.

Tsunade's entire existence was narrowed to herself and that medical bed.

The curtains tore from the force as she pulled them back.

Mikael, propping his head up casually with one arm, popped another grape in his mouth as he looked at her.

Then he nodded.

“Yep,” he said, eating another grape. “You’re Mine, alright.”

Tsunade was frozen, staring at the man of her dreams.

Then he was behind her.

SMACK!

“““““Tsunade-sama!!”””””BAA-CHAN!”

The entire room screamed in shock as Mikael spanked her on the ass hard enough to send her flying and denting the wall.

“That’s what you get,” Mikael said casually, ignoring the Shinobi and Kunoichi trying to attack him. They passed through his body harmlessly as he walked toward the woman, still paralyzed with shock. “This is why we travel together. Next time you try a ritual to find your home dimension, ensure I am there. Tracking isekai is a lot easier when I see the metaphorical truck-kun.”

Still embedded in the wall, Mikael looming over her, Tsunade couldn’t help herself.

“Kai!”

Mikael raised an eyebrow when nothing happened.

“Do you know how many dimensions I’ve had to hop through to find you? Sixty seven. It was a major hassle, and I didn’t even get to make a sixty-nine joke. For shame.”

He was mad. That was obvious. Tsunade didn’t remember exactly what happened, but it was easy to see that Mikael wasn’t pleased.

But he was here.

He was real.

It hadn’t been a dream.

“““““Tsunade-sama!!”””””BAA-CHAN!”

Shizune, Sakura, Hinata, and Naruto all froze when Tsunade shoved her tongue down her attacker’s throat, hands desperately grasping him as if he were the last drop of sake in the world.

Mikael eventually pulled away. The anger was still in his draconic eyes, but there was also much more there.

Tenderness. Relief. Love.

Tears streamed from Tsunade’s eyes as she stared into them.

“I thought I had lost you,” Mikael admitted, his own eyes moist, but he never cried openly.

Tsunade knew it was partly his ego and partly his own twisted form of Love.

Mikael wasn’t above crying, but he always felt the need to put up a strong front for the Family. To be someone they relied on rather than the other way around.

It was such a Mikael thing to do that she had to kiss him again.

“Yuck,” Naruto said, faking a barf. “Baa-chan, do that somewhere else.”

“Ano,” Hinata said shyly, half looking away. “You, um, know each other?”

Shizune and Sakura just stared, mouths open and eyes wide.

Tsunade was the one to break the kiss this time.

“This is my husband,” Tsunade said to the group before rounding Mikael and ignoring their screams of “”””HUSBAND!!!!”””

“What happened,” she demanded as she mastered herself. “I don’t remember how I got here. I don’t have Haki, Aura, Defences, or my Element.”

“You were trying a ritual to find your home worlds,” Mikael explained, though he did laugh lightly at the faces of those around them. “But you used the one we invented to summon me into my true body from Elden Ring. It isn’t really designed for that. It’s designed to place a soul, a spirit, in a body. It brought your consciousness into the closest world to your home.”

A body appeared in Mikael’s arms. Her body. It looked like he was holding a sleeping Tsunade in his arms as he set it on the bed.

“How long has it been,” Tsunade asked lowly as she stared at the empty vessel.

“Don’t worry,” Mikael shook his head. “Once I heard about what happened, I changed the relative time of the Jewel. It’s barely been an hour for the Family.”

“Sensei,” Shizune asked gently. “What is going on? Who is this man?”

“I’ll explain in a moment,” Tsunade said, staring intently at the man as if daring him to lie. “And you? How long has it been for you? It’s been months here.”

Mikael shrugged casually.

“Seven thousand, give or take a few centuries. I needed to be thorough, so I wouldn’t miss you on accident.”

Tsunade closed her eyes in pain. Knowing what she did of Mikael’s abilities, she must have been flung incredibly far in the multiverse for it to take so long.

Maybe even beyond the section Death was native to.

“I should have killed myself.”

“SENSEI?!”

“It would have been quicker,” Mikael admitted but shook his head. “I am glad you didn’t. There was no need. A few thousand years is nothing. I’ll search forever if it means finding you again.”

Tsunade opened her eyes again and saw Mikael holding out his hand.

“Ready to come home?”

“I thought you weren’t limited like this anymore,” Tsunade said with a small smile.

“I am not. You are Family. You will always have the choice.”

Tsunade took the man’s hand and chose Freedom.

Her body fell to the ground as her soul was freed from its prison.

The gathered observers didn’t even have time to react before Mikael placed Tsunade’s soul in Her body.

It came back in an instant.

Haki, Aura, Wood Release, and her connection to Nature chakra.

But that was immaterial compared to the feeling of Him.

Tsunade was once more a Dragon of Life.

She could feel Him. All around her. In her. In everything.

Tsunade could feel his Love.

She took a breath and opened her eyes.

For the first time in months, Tsunade felt actually alive.

“There we go,” Mikael said as he looked at his work proudly.

“What did you do to Baa-chan,” Naruto growled, holding the empty corpse in his arms.

“I am fine,” Tsunade said, sitting up. “That wasn’t me. I was just wearing it. Think of it like one of Pein’s bodies or a long-lasting shadow clone.”

Not strictly true, she had just merged with the local Tsunade and mixed together. That’s why they could share memories.

They should have been separated when Mikael Freed them, this world’s Tsunade staying her body while she regained her proper form.

Unless this world’s Tsunade chose Freedom, chose Mikael and Family over her current life and decided to remain bound to Tsunade as one being.

“Prove it,” Sakura said seriously, fist clenched. “Prove you didn’t just kill my teacher.”

“I could lecture you about the metaphysics of the soul, the theories on streams of consciousness, and my ability to determine what is Mine and what isn’t. I’m sure it would help tensions, make everyone feel better, and help your confusion,” Mikael said conversationally as he nodded his head sagely.

Tsunade groaned, hands covering her face. She knew that tone of his. Mikael was about to do something insane, wasn’t he?

“Or, I could do the exact opposite and cause as much chaos as possible in a way that will prevent you from even trying to use violence to stop me.”

“And how will you do that?” Sakura bit out, punching her fist into her palm.

“Through the Justice of Cute!”

With that warcry, Mikael unleashed chaos on the world.

“‘Mommy!!’” Two young voices cried as Tsunade was tackled to the medical bed by her two frantic toddlers with enough strength to dent steel.

Mikael cackled in the background like the chaos gremlin he was as the room stood dumbfounded as the blond-haired, dragon-eyed Senju twins reunited with their mother.

Tsunade couldn’t be mad at her husband as she held her sons.

She was home.

Author's Note:

This Omake ended up a lot longer than I expected. Less directly funny but more heartwarming. I also consider this one half-canon. Some things won't line up, but I wanted to write a form of closure for Tsunade. She has gotten less screen time than I would have liked, so this was the least I could do.

I have another Omake coming in a few hours, but there was no reason not to release it now. Especially since I would like to request permission from a few of my readers to publish their own Omakes on other sites. I will credit the creators, of course, but if you do not wish me to attach them to the Omake bundle released today, let me know, and I will remove them.

For those who haven't read them, they are listed as Omake: The Woman-Who-Knew-Memes by Himera and Omake: Bad End 1 by TheCenterAct. They can be found, like all omakes, under the Extra tab.

OMAKE IV: FATE/RUN AWAY

Saber stared at the steps leading to Ryoudou Temple for a half second before running up.

While she understood the need for caution, it went against her beliefs to leave Caster alone while they not only knew where she was, but the mage was also siphoning mana from people and killing them in the process.

Was Saber here against her Master's wishes? Yes, but it was better this way.

Shiro would insist on coming with her if he knew, and protecting him would make victory all the more unlikely.

Besides, Saber still had her enormous Magic Resistance, even with her botched summoning. The battle would end in less than a second if she could get near Caster.

Those thoughts propelled her up the steep stairway to the temple and her quarry.

They almost Saber her head.

Only her Instinct had the Knight jumping back in time to dodge the blade passing through where her neck would have been if she hadn't escaped.

"This mountain was built by me; these trees were planted by me; this road was opened by me! If you want to use this road, you must pay the mountain toll. Break this rule at your own peril!"

Saber stared.

And stared some more.

"What?" The man asked. "Was the delivery off? I knew I should have practiced more, but I didn't have much time, you know? I have surprisingly little experience accosting women. I should really fix that."

There was so much wrong with this situation, even ignoring the absurdity of his words.

For one, the man didn't feel like a servant. He didn't feel like anything at all, which was making Saber twitchy. But if he wasn't a Servant, he wouldn't have been able to almost kill Saber.

The logical conclusion was that this man was Assassin, with a very high rank in Presence Concealment, which would also explain his choice of words.

There was just one problem.

His shirt.

This man, whoever he was, was wearing the single most egregiously hideous shirt Saber had ever seen. Bright white, with pink and red flowers decorating it, it was open to show off his muscled abdomen. His shorts were also floral printed, but green and white

instead of red. He wasn't wearing shoes.

If it weren't for the fact he held a sword in his hand, one that set her teeth on edge, Saber would have mistaken him for a beach bum.

She didn't know what that was, but her Grail Knowledge told Saber that this man must die at all costs.

"Identify yourself," Saber ordered, invisible sword pointed right at the man's face.

"Name's Mikael."

Saber stared again.

That was… easy. One's True Name was an advantage not easily let go of in a Holy Grail War.

"I was going to go for a whole King of Bandits thing," the man said with a chuckle at her expression. "The mood is ruined, though. No need to lie now. Besides, I know who you are, Artoria. Fairplay and all that."

"That is not my name," Saber frowned.

"So you aren't Artoria Pendragon?" The man asked rhetorically, looking amused. "King Arthur, the Once and Future King? The King of Knights? That isn't Excalibur under the Hammer of the Wind King pointed at my face? You will have to forgive me if I don't believe you."

"No," Saber shook her head, lowering her stance and readying herself for battle against this new foe. "I am King Arthur, the King of Knights, as you say. But my name is not Artoria. It is Altria."

All amusement fled from Mikael's face as he stared at the blonde for a long second.

Then he let out a long stream of curses, stomping and hollering in rage as expletive after expletive left his mouth.

Altria had lived with knights and soldiers for most of her life. Merlin had been her tutor and advisor for years. She wasn't unfamiliar with cursing, though she didn't partake as it was unbefitting a king.

Some of the things coming out of Mikael's mouth were so foul that even she couldn't help but blush in shame.

They were also anatomically impossible, she was sure.

And what was a cloaca?

"-micro-penis, dirt munching, language retarded, shit-talking shitake. NASU!!! You damn mushroom!! Hire proper translators, you cheap motherfucker! FGO LITERALLY PRINTS MONEY! Stop with this crappy ENGRISH, or I will smear you across dimensions!"

Mikael panted in rage, staring at Altria with red eyes.

Not from the rage. His eyes were literally a fiery orange and red, slit like a dragon's.

“Ok,” Mikael said, calming down and running a hand through his hair. “Ok. I’m good now. You just triggered my PTSD.”

“Apologies?” Saber asked/apologized. “Why does my name infuriate you so? I do not recognize you from my time.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mikael sighed. “Let’s just fight to the death already. I need to hit something.”

While Saber wasn’t opposed to battling the man, she did have a few questions she would prefer answered.

“Who are you? A Servant? Why are you here? And where is Caster?”

“In order,” Mikael said, raising his blade. “I was summoned as the Assassin of this war. I qualify for all classes, and any one of my wives counts as a catalyst for me, so here I am. I am specifically here to get in a good fight for the heck of it. At least initially. Now, I just need to vent a bit. Fucking mushroom-man. And Caster is probably in Paris by now.”

“Paris?” Altria asked.

Why was the Caster in this Holy Grail War on the other side of the planet?

“On her honeymoon,” Mikael nodded.

“Did you not say she was your wife? Should you not be with her?” Talking to this man was giving Saber a headache.

And she was a Servant.

They shouldn’t be able to get headaches.

“I mean, she’s a version of my wife,” Mikael shrugged. “But she’s not Mine, ya know? And there are an infinite number of my women out in the multiverse. I’m good. Really good. But even I cannot please an infinite number of my wives. The spirit and flesh are willing and able, but Space-Time is spongy and weak.”

Wat.

“So I reincarnated this one, married her to Soichiro, and bought them tickets for a month-long honeymoon. They should be landing right about now.”

So… Saber hadn’t needed to run off on her own to try and save innocent people from a malevolent Caster.

So fighting this Assassin, who had possibly just admitted to being a Sorcerer with access to the Third True Magic, served no purpose besides removing him from the Holy Grail War?

Altria would still do it.

She wouldn’t run from a fight, especially with her wish on the line, but her haste to attack the temple without Rin and Archer now seemed a little… hasty.

“Are we done talking?” Mikael asked. “Because I am going hit you now. Try not to

die.”

Mikael lunged.

Altria braced.

Mikael exploded.

Literally.

Altria stared at the pile of mushy bits that used to be Assassin.

All that remained was the bloody remains of a terrible shirt and two legs not attached to anything.

His sword fell to the ground with a clang.

“ARCHER!” Tohsaka’s voice cut through Saber’s shock. “I told you to wait!”

“Rin,” Archer’s voice sounded utterly defeated despite having successfully eliminated a Grail War participant.

“Don’t ‘Rin’ me! It worked this time, but what if it didn’t? Huh? What if you missed or hit Saber, or they had some sort of plan? This could be a trap, for all you know! If we’re going to win, we need to think things through.”

“Archer,” Saber bit out in anger as her fellow Servant landed on the stairs near her, his Master in his arms. “What is the meaning of this?”

While this wasn’t a formal duel between knights, and Saber wasn’t opposed to fighting many against one, her experience in the Fourth Holy Grail had left scars.

Any similarities to how her previous Master did things left a bad taste in her mouth.

“Sorry, Saber,” Archer sighed as he set down his Master. “When I saw Mikael, I literally could not help myself.”

“You knew him?” Altria asked in surprise.

Even with access to the Throne of Heroes and the repository of knowledge it contained, Saber hadn’t been able to identify him despite his name and seeing his weapon. Yet Archer had at a glance?

Archer sighed again, slumping forward in defeat.

“Yeah,” Rin joined in, hands on her hips and eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You knew him? I thought you didn’t remember anything?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Archer said, summoning one of his dual blades. He raised it, spinning it till it faced downward. “Nothing matters anymore.”

Even as the blade fell, Saber’s mind flashed back to the previous war.

Excalibur knocked Kansho from Archer’s hands before the blade could plunge into the man’s own chest.

“ARCHER!” Rin shouted in surprise. Her hand raised Command Seal at the ready. “Explain yourself!”

Archer just sighed again and looked at Saber.

It was a look that begged her to kill him.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” a voice interrupted them. “Ayala has a bit of an issue with me. Any of her Guardians that see me have to kill me on sight and then themselves. She’s a bit of Yandere. Still better than Gaia.”

Mikael, completely undamaged, walked between the two frozen women as they stared in shock.

Even his god-awful shirt was repaired and pristine.

Archer tried to kill himself again.

Mikael reached him first.

All the Assassin did was lay his hands on the Servant, and Archer stopped trying to impale himself with a rain of swords.

“She’s going to be so mad,” Archer sighed, rubbing his face tiredly. “Do you know how she gets when you Free us? I was cleanup duty for at least a thousand timelines!”

“Then you need a vacation,” Mikael said imperiously. “And what do you know I happen to have this great-”

Mikael exploded.

Rin yelled in shock as blood and body parts rained down on her.

Saber stepped back, blade raised.

Archer just sighed for the dozenth time.

“You are in so much trouble,” a cloaked woman said as she flew down from the top of the mountain to their little group.

“Hey, Medea,” Archer greeted wearily.

“Emiya,” the woman nodded in acknowledgment. Rin and Altria stared at the red Archer in shock. “I take it my husband already Freed you?”

“Yeah,” Archer nodded easily, ignoring Rin trying to set him on fire with her glare. “Any idea what he has planned this time?”

“No,” Medea spat, landing on the ground and stomping on the bloody remains of a terrible shirt. “All I know is he is in serious trouble.”

“I am innocent!” Mikael cried as his head regrew. Medea was still standing on his chest, glaring down at him. “Also, Assassins suck. Their Spirit Origins are so fragile. I can regrow, but I would much rather not turn to salsa at the slightest hit.”

“You could always Free yourself from the Class Container,” Medea said with a roll of her eyes.

“But that’s no fun,” Mikael pouted. “Half the reason I accept these summons is to see what happens with whatever Class I end up in. I thought Assassin would be a good fit, you

know? But it's so squishy. If I can't be a Saver, can I at least be a Saber, Lancer Rider, Berserker, or Avenger?"

"NO!!!" Archer shouted, his weariness replaced by wide-eyed fear. "I was there when you were summoned as an Avenger."

"You were?" Mikael asked curiously. "I don't remember seeing you."

"Because you destroyed the world before I could do anything!"

"Huh," Mikael hummed. "In my defence, I am immune to all mental interference by my own. I had no idea my Avenger class was so focused on the last half of Elden Ring. My bad. I don't allow myself to be summoned in that Class anymore."

Rin made a choking noise.

"Don't allow yourself to be a Berserker either," Archer said seriously.

"Why not? I didn't destroy that world. At least, I don't think so. I am not even an angry Berserker."

"What I think he means, dear," Medea interjected, reminding her husband that she was still standing on him. "Is that when you are a Berseker, you are completely unfiltered. Both in your sense of humour and in more… amorous moments."

Even Saber, novice that she was, could guess what the woman spoke of by the flush on her face.

"I didn't hear you complain," Mikael said with narrowed eyes.

"I won't deny it was enjoyable," Medea coughed into her hand as she looked away. "But after the first month, it did get a bit excessive. The only reason it wasn't fatal was because there were thirteen of us to rotate through, and even then, we do get worn out."

"No, you don't," Mikael denied with a furrowed brow. "I made sure everyone was healthy and energized. And, like you said, you could rotate. I could have stayed a Berserker for at least a year without issue. What was the problem?"

"THE PUNS!" Medea finally caved with a wail of despair. "It was the puns! We couldn't stand them. No sex was worth that much pain. Even Robin was sick of them after a month. Half the reason we were so eager was because you'd fuck us unconscious so we wouldn't have to listen to any more puns!"

Altria shared a wide-eyed look with Rin. Both their faces were beet red with mortification.

Archer just sighed again.

"Huh," Mikael gave it some thought before nodding. "Fair enough. I won't be a Berserker anymore."

"Really?" Medea perked up. "Just like that? I thought you were having fun?"

"Well… yeah?" Mikael said as if it should be obvious. "A constant stream of jokes isn't

funny. It is only with contrast that you laugh. Timing is key. If being a Berserker throws that off, there is no point in being one. Besides, half the jokes I make are so you all will laugh. I want you to genuinely enjoy my company."

"Awww," Medea said with a smile, leaning down and quickly kissing the man. "Let me guess, the other half of your jokes are for yourself."

"You know me so well," Mikael laughed. "By the way, why are you standing on me? Not that I am opposed, the view is great. You know I like the black set. But you also know I hate being accused of things I didn't do. So why are you angry?"

"You were going to hurt Saber!"

Altria, who had been watching this bizarre show in confusion, suddenly found herself under everyone's eyes.

"No I wasn't," Mikael denied. "I was just going to fight her. She'd be fine."

Saber didn't know whether to feel flattered by the fact this strange Assassin had so much confidence in her or angry that he believed he could fight her without trying to hurt her.

"But she'd get dirty," Medea responded. "I have the studio all set up for Smol Saber. We're starting with a princess theme and everything. Most of the dresses are white. A dirty Saber doesn't work with frills. Gap Moe is tomorrow."

Mikael gave his wife a look of such profound pity that even Medea stepped back in surprise.

"Dear," he sighed in disappointment.

"What?" Medea asked defensively.

"When you're dolls get dirty," Mikael said slowly as if speaking to a child. "You clean them. When someone gets dirty, they take a bath."

As one, the husband and wife looked at Saber.

Altria took a step back in fear.

Medea's hands made a lewd grasping motion.

"I apologize, dear," Medea said, wiping a bit of drool from her lips. "Clearly, I underestimated your genius. I will make it up to you."

Saber ran.

Medea followed, cackling like a lewd witch as she flew after the woman.

"Well," Mikael sighed as he stood up, wiping himself off. "I suppose if I am not getting my fight with Saber, you two will just have to do."

"What is going on," Rin Tohsaka bit out, her brain overloading from so much information and shocking events that she defaulted to Basic Tsundere Programming (TM) and was ready to unleash embarrassed fury on the nearest victim.

Unfortunately, she chose a man well-versed in the way of the Dere.

“Glad you asked,” Mikael said, pulling a scroll from nowhere.

An honest-to-god scroll.

It unrolled until it reached the ground, then continued down the stairs.

Rin stared at the absurdity.

“This is my forty-two-step plan,” Mikael said proudly, holding up the scroll. “I call it Today’s Menu: The Only Canon Timeline!”

The perfect strategy for dealing with Common Tsun. Especially the Twin-Tailed Subspecies.

Distract them with madness till they give up.

“I have already accomplished our first three goals,” Mikael explained. “We can revisit Saber later. If we want to stay on plan, all we need to do tonight is kidnap a Shoulder Loli, get the Berser-car, and use it to crush an annoying worm. Tomorrow, we will work on financing and spearfishing. I know, just the guys. One owes me a favour for his Gay Clay, and the other has PTSD about one of my wives so bad it is engraved in his Legend. Easy Peazy. We’ll have world peace by the end of the week.”

Rin started frothing at the mouth.

Archer sighed again.

Author's Note:

A few lighthearted Omakes to end the year and as a refresher before we go into the last stretch for Rapturous Rhapsody.

New Year is a time to reflect on the year behind you and look toward the future.

While December kicked my ass, and there were other low points, as a whole, 2023 was a better year for me than 2022. I didn't have to move four times, for one. I also started my second story, On The Bench, which has received great reception.

But let's be honest. The world is in a rough place right now. Times are challenging for a lot of people for a lot of reasons. These issues will continue into 2024, and we can't stop them. It can be disheartening and depressing.

All we can control in life is ourselves. So when life places a Wall in your way, throw yourselves against it. When you fail, you will get up and do it again. And again. And again. And one day, when you are bloody and bruised, you will be standing on the other side.

The Wall will fall.

Do not let the world break you. Break the world.

Force 2024 to be better.

Spend time with friends or family. Set goals, or just relax and enjoy life. Create something. Finish a book or game that you've wanted to play for years. Start exercising or confess to a crush. No matter what you do, do your best to make life just a little bit better for yourself. We only live once, and at the end of the day, the king and the pawn go in the same box, so enjoy the game.

In 2024, I will finish both my stories, maybe start a third after if inspiration hits. That isn't even a New Year's resolution, by the way. That's just fact, and I won't allow it to be false. I've written over 400k words this year, and a paltry 200k or so to wrap them up will be easy. (Famous last words.)

I hope everyone had a good year and that 2024 will be even better. I will see you all in the New Year.

Afterword

AFTERWORD

So, what's this?

It's only the mad ramblings and self-reflections of a fanfiction author. I do this whenever I finish any sort of project, reflecting on my thought process, ideas, and what went wrong and right. I am always looking to improve, and self-reflection is important to that process.

Since I actually released this story, I decided to also release this. If you are uninterested in the semi-coherent ramblings of a two-bit author or a deeper dive into Rapturous Rhapsody, then feel free to skip.

If you do decide to read it, fair warning that this a word vomit soup, completely unedited and following my train of thought off a cliff. I had planned on releasing it on Monday, but I just kept writing and writing and writing. Here we are, Friday, and even now, I still feel like I have too many thoughts that just need to be written down.

First of all, I guess I should talk about the high-level 'concept' of the story. The goal I was trying to achieve, in as much as it could be considered to have 'one goal.' Realistically, this is only the 'story' goal, not the a bunch of other, more IRL goals.

I wanted Rapturous Rhapsody to be a Soulsborne fanfiction with a superhero storyline.

Basically, I wanted the story to be structured like a comic book, with comic tropes, characters, and the like, but the core story to be inherently Soulsborne-based.

I wanted a Dark Souls-Bloodborne-Elden Ring story, using their themes and characters, without retreading those games themselves. Time and time again, I tried to convey certain themes, tones, ideals and moods that tied to those games.

As for the superhero aspect, part of it was to give a Waifu Catalogue-based story a sense of challenge, but also because I appreciated the dichotomy.

Superhero worlds, even at their most grim and realistic, are based on 'exceptionalism.' Either through character, power, or circumstances.

Soulsborne worlds, on the other hand, are very clear that PC is in no way exceptional. They are nameless, faceless, replaceable dregs. The complete opposite of exceptionalism.

I think the Waifu Catalogue embodies that idea perfectly. Some schmuck, due to multiversal bureaucracy, is given power and set loose to fulfill their every wish, all under the corporate backdrop of mundane, banal, interdimensional slavery.

That is the high-level concept of Rapturous Rhapsody: A Dark Souls story in a superhero world.

Now, where to start?

I guess at the beginning.

First off, as mentioned a few times in the story, Rapturous Rhapsody is based on a one-shot I wrote and never released. The Waifu Catalogue was relatively new back then, and I remember reading a few stories based on it.

Most of them were porn, but a few had some novel concepts, so I decided to poke around with the Catalogue for the hell of it.

I sometimes do that when I find interesting prompts or challenges as little brain teasers. I ended up fiddling with it a few times here and there for a week or two before seeing something that really pulled my interest.

For those that don't know, or it's been a while since you read the early chapters, every World is assigned a Tier, which determines the number of points you get at the beginning. From there, you can use points to purchase people or abilities.

Obviously, it's not perfectly balanced, even now, but back then there were a bunch of different rules and ways to game the system. The modern-day Catalogue is almost completly different than what it was then.

Right away, I found something that was wholly broken: Soulsborne World was considered Tier 9, the second highest, giving it a huge amount of points to start. While that might makes sense in a broad scope of lore, we are talking gods, dragons, and the ruin of civilizations, it also fails to understand the central conceit of Miyazaki's works.

Souls games are designed to be beaten.

The entire premise of pretty much every one of them, from demon souls to dark souls, to bloodborne, to Elden Ring, is that some random, no-name scrub with no ability, through sheer perseverance, can overcome everything in their way.

Souls games have a reputation for being difficult, rightly so, but they were all designed in such a way that anybody can beat them if they put forth the effort. The most challenging is bloodborne, only because it demands faster reflexes, but even that can be mitigated by gaining knowledge of your oppenet.

So, if naked Joe Schmoe with a toothpick can beat Gwyn, Lord of Light, because of skill, what do you do when you throw in someone overpowered, like, say, a Tier 10 Dragon or any number of OP waifus.

A simple prompt, see how much I can min-max this oversight, ended up being a 10K one shot that I wrote while bored one day.

Cut to a few months later, its june of 2022, Elden Ring is out, and I decide its time to try my hand at publishing a story of my own. Before I do anything original, I want to practice and get feedback. Fanfiction is the way to go.

But what to write?

I have, at time of writing this reflection, 11 story ideas bouncy around in my head. Some

are fanfiction, others are original works. Some I've written parts of, others are just ideas or concepts.

Long-term readers will know that I will never release anything until I know how it ends. Part of it is my frustration with serialized releases not ending, not just fanfiction but other serialized products, like TV shows, book series, or manga. Another part is I find it easier to write if I know what I am writing toward. If I have a beginning and an ending, then I know I can fill in the middle.

So, looking to grow and challenge myself as a writer, I thought about what would be an interesting story and concept, while also being a challenge.

Then, I had the idea of taking that old short story and trying to create a compelling narrative around that.

It would be challenging.

It would be entertaining. (Or at least I hoped so.)

It would give me plenty of characters to practice with.

I decided to do it.

The first step was to recreate the catalogue descriptions as best as I could since I had lost the computer with that story and the first version I had filled out.

Once I had that as a starting point, I needed to decide what World to put my story in.

I am against world-hopping in stories in general, except in special cases, because at any point, there is no reason for the characters not to just leave their World, grow stronger in another, and come back with the power to solve all problems with out-of-context powers. I knew I wanted to keep the main story in one singular World. That World had to be challenging enough to pose a risk to even Tier 10 beings.

Enter the DC-Marvel-Worm hybrid.

Comic worlds are inherently obsurd, filled with all sorts of powers, characters, and story lines for me to play with. On top of that, three of the initial 10 'waifus' I chose came from comic worlds. That would give me something to play off of and act as a tether of sorts to keep the characters in one World.

With a world established and a starting point, it was time to choose how I would end the story.

The antagonist was easy. Darkseid is such a perfect villain for someone whose elements were 'life and freedom' that I felt it too perfect not to use him. I'll go over him more soon. But an antagonist is not an ending.

I thought about it for weeks, tossing around ideas, from some great showdown fight to an elaborate scheme to some great unity, a coming together of disparate peoples to beat him back. Some of those ideas did make it into the ending in small ways, but I eventually decided to go

another way.

I had decided to play with comic book tropes since it would be in a comic world. Not necessarily comics as stories, though there were some, but comic books as a medium.

And one of my favorite aspects of comics is the 'origin story.' Not necessarily as a 'backstory' but more like 'pivotal events that shape this character forevermore.'

The best stories in comic, in my opinion, are those that take the core conciet of a character and challenge it. Their endings tend to be when the character, after being confronted with this challenge, must decide whether to stick with who they have been, or adapt to who they need to be.

There is no right answer. I've seen great stories where the character made either choice.

But I decided I wanted Mikael to face that same challenge. Over and over again.

And the ending needed to reflect that inner challenge rather than the outer one.

So, I set my ending as 'Mikael doubles down on his convictions, not giving up who he is even after everything it has cost. Only then can he overcome the challenge, even knowing it might cost more in the future.'

World, beginning, and ending in place, I set out to create a story.

Step 1: Break the Catalogue

The Waifu Catalogue is, inherently, a tool for wish fufillment fantasies. I wanted some aspects of that in my story, sure, but I also needed things to not always go the way my characters wanted. Little things like cameras not being covered with Information Defence.

For a while, I just read through the Catalogue and came up with countermeasures. Some were easy, like opening a portal and making it invisible to get around information defence. Others were a bit more challenging.

Mind, Addiction, and Stress Defence would completely no sell any challenge the soulsborn worlds would pose to Mikael, so I eventually settled on the concept of using the Defences as a 'Reward' for clearing those worlds. That was the Doyalist reason, at least.

The Watsonian reason is that Death, because she wouldn't be able to control Mikael, would have to incentivize him to doing what she wanted instead of running around the multiverse and getting killed.

Death was also a major part of breaking the Catalogue.

I knew early on that I'd use the patron system, though it was DLC at the time rather than a part of the core catalogue. I also knew that Death would be the one I'd choose. Not only because it would give the 'waifus' a bit more depth, coming from bad-end worlds, but also because the concept of Death being the patron of a dragon of life had some symmetry I'd want to play with.

Death as a character was... difficult. I tried to get into the mindset of a being that is an omniversal concept yet is still inferior to The Company. I wanted them to be this figure in the

background, not really a character but an incentivizing force that acts in a way that regular people can't understand.

Death never lied in this entire story.

Not once.

More than that, she straight up told Mikael who and what she was their first meeting. I wanted her character to be something that only really makes sense, if at all when looking back from The End.

Anyway, got sidetracked a bit.

Step 2: The Origin Story

Those who read my first few author notes remember that I had initially considered Volume 1 a prologue of sorts. 'The prologue that never ended.' It wound up being 150K words instead of the 25~50K I expected.

I made a few choices with it that I feel are important to reflect on.

Firstly, to not have anything from Mikael's perspective in the Dark Souls worlds.

One, because I didn't want to rehash stories or plots that others might already know; two, because I wanted to practice writing a variety of characters; and three, because I wanted to see if I could convey Mikael's character through an outside perspective.

Man, I got a lot of hate for that.

So much of the response for those first three parts was hating on Mikael for being all depressed or the girls for their general lack of 'doing' anything. I'm not going to lie. It sucked.

Still, looking back, I stand by it. Not only because I do think it gave me a better grasp of the 'waifus' and practice writing their characters, but also because I still think too much of fanfiction, especially self-insert fanfiction, is simply a repeat of canon events.

Still, I took those complaints into mind as the story moved on to Elden Ring.

I think, for many people, the Elden Ring arc is still their favourite to this day.

I can see why, and I hope you can forgive me if I spend longer on it than other parts.

It is largely free of the complicated world-building that came after; it was a world almost everyone had played due to the game's popularity, its few fights were 'small scale' instead of the crazy power battles of superheroes, and it was a defining time for Mikael.

Not only did it introduce two fan favourites in Ranni and Melina, but it also represented a time when Mikael's core values were starting to come into focus.

I decided to write the Elden Ring chapters, largely from Mikeal's perspective, for a couple of reasons.

First, the game was still fresh in my mind. Second, its characters would hang around longer and play a role in Mikael's continued development. And third, there actually was a story to tell there. Up until that point, Mikael had largely been travelling alone. It would have been boring to

go 'fight another hollow/boss/monster, die, repeat, win.'

The first chapter of Desolation was a positioning device. Both so we could get a closer look at the World, but also to understand who Mikael was when not around the 'waifus.'

The second chapter onward was when Mikael's 'story' really started to grow. Not only does he begin with his first-ever attempt to leave the prison world, one of his first acts of agency, but he also starts to have an inkling that something is wrong with himself. Somewhere along the way, through all the battle and pain, 'Freedom' has become the goal, rather a step toward his goal.

Mikael's begun to Rot.

In Mikael's haste to be free, to protect his 'self,' he's begun to warp and change. It's understandable, nobody can go through what he did and not change. But he hasn't realized it at this point.

Chapters three and four of Desolation were from Ranni's perspective.

Once again, there were a few reasons for that. First of all, she's such an interesting character. Even ignoring the miss-translation of her ending sequence, she's a juxtaposition of a character.

For one, she clearly loves Iji and Blaidd, as well as her mother. She risked her life, after hiding and pretending to be dead for centuries, to protect Ranalla. Not all of them, though. She's clearly willing to work with distasteful beings like Selvus and never mentions Adula at all.

She's also one of, if not THE, key figures that led to the War of the Shattering. It's a toss up between Marika and Ranni who bore the most responsibility, though one can't argue the time before was any better. The Golden Order just had a nicer veneer, but all the problems were still there.

Anyway, I digressed again.

Ranni's chapters.

I wanted to portray how batshit insane the actions of PC are in Elden Ring from a local's perspective. Nobody had ever done what the PC does and defeated these infamous demigods. The closest is Vyke, and he never touched the more powerful ones like Radhan or Malenia. I also wanted to parallel Ranni's journey with Mikael's. Those two chapters became an almost microcosm of Mikael's time in prison.

Then comes one of my most controversial decisions (at the time, at least): Melina's sacrifice.

First of all, Mikael's journey in Elden Ring almost perfectly mirrors my own experience, and the way to 'save' Melina is so out of the way and specific that I realistically can't expect him to have discovered it. More than that, Mikael has an entirely different context from the one we do. He was looking at the World from the Dark Souls perspective, where the PC is a bearer of flame that ends up burning.

Secondly, from a narrative point of view, Melina's sacrifice is the catalyst that fully

confronts Mikael with the truth: In trying to save 'himself,' he's lost 'himself' along the way.

Unlike later, when Emma dies, he sees no hope of getting Melina back. Melina, who he loves and is sure the feelings are entirely his own.

It is Mikael's nadir, his lowest moment. Melina is Mikael's Uncle Ben, his Thomas and Martha Wayne. Only, it is a willing sacrifice, one that was not needed but came about because of Mikael's fundamental issues.

Before Elden Ring, Mikael would have been a loner. After losing Melina, he would have been a villain.

Which leads to the chapters after her death. Here I wanted to futher hint at Mikael's true character.

He's not a hero. He's at his lowest point and taking that anger out on the World through violence.

He's not a monster. He channels that violence to further his goals rather than devastating easy targets. A monster would have returned to places they've been and torn a bloody path through those they knew they could beat.

Melina's death is the moment where Mikael reaffirms his humanity.

Until now, he's been moving forward toward Freedom, but her loss forces him to confront what that Freedom has cost.

And he can't handle that. He's only human.

So, he rages against the World.

Then, Millicent.

Millicent's views are almost completely opposite to Mikael's. Where he does everything to cling to life, to his 'self,' she would rather die on her terms. Where he'd rather use tricky and 'dishonourable' tactics if it meant victory, she'd rather fight by herself against overwhelming odds rather than dishonour herself in the way Malania did.

Millicent's entire life was one of suffering, unlike Mikael, who has very clear memories of a time without it, yet she is the nobler one of the pair.

Her promise forces Mikael to stop. To throw himself against a Wall if he wants to continue on his journey.

Not Malania. The Wall is never another person, place or situation.

We are our Walls.

Mikael cannot move on until he breaks his Wall.

Dying was never his Wall because he could not die for good.

Surrendering is not his Wall because he cannot remain still.

Malania is not his Wall; he could have defeated her with tricks aplenty if he had wanted.

No, Mikael's Wall, just like all Walls, is internal.

It's only when we choose to give up, only when we choose to lay down our swords, only when we stop trying that our Walls win.

Mikael's Wall breaks.

He's able to accept what he's become—not just know it, but accept it. He accepts the fault, the blame. The choices he's made have led to this, and he has to live with it.

And finally, step forward in the right direction.

Mikael, at this point, is a half-finished product. A new weapon that needs to be sharpened. An amour that needs to withstand blows to prove itself.

He's formed his core personality. Now, to be complete, he needs to refine it. To prove it is what and who he wants to be.

Everything after this can be seen through the lens of challenging that conviction that forms in the final battle with Malania.

Letting Ranni into his heart is a challenging but manageable step.

Bloodborne is the first true test.

Emma Frost. The woman he Mastered. The woman he trusted. The woman who betrayed him. The woman he loves but is convinced the feelings are fake.

Mikael has to let Emma into his mind, the one place he considers his true 'self' more than any other.

A lot of people have asked why Bloodborne affected Mikael so much.

The simple truth is that Bloodborne tested every aspect of Mikael.

It is such a short time, both for him and for us. Only one chapter. But so much is condensed into that time that it resonates with him for the rest of his existence.

The first reason is that everyone he kills actually stays dead.

These are not the wandering people of the Land's Between, cursed to never experience Destined Death. Nor is it the undead of Dark Souls.

These are regular people who've turned into monsters because of beings far more powerful than them, because of being deceived by institutions that promise salvation and provide damnation.

In every being that he killed, Mikael sees what he is and what he has become.

And he cannot help them.

The only thing he can do is offer them a swift death. The mercy he has been denied.

Secondly, Bloodborne reinforced his helplessness in controlling his own mind. Even when he tried to loose himself to the bloodlust and go beast, he cannot. He can't die and can't lose his sanity to forget the fear and pain.

Thirdly, Bloodborne is the crystalization of all the choices Mikael has made until this point. A reaffirmation of his humanity once more.

A hero might have simply waited for Emma to be summoned, unwilling to kill the people of this World. They might have simply run through the city, killing the Old Ones but leaving the beasts alone.

A monster would have killed without distinction. Innocent or guilty, infected or not.

Mikael enjoyed the violence, make no mistake, but it was always violence with purpose. And that led him to his decision to 'save' the World of Yharnam. In every World until then, he had tried to provide a happy ending to those he could. He wasn't always successful, but he tried.

In Bloodborne, he tried to save a world.

Even amongst his fear of the inevitable confrontation with Emma, his helplessness at his own mental state, and his rage at his being confined, Mikael still tried to do 'something' to help people.

Mikael cannot stand still. His ego, his arrogance, his wanderlust, his ambition, his desire for improvement. All of it. A million reasons and more. Mikael, as a character, always needs to be doing something.

Because if he does nothing then what purpose is there in being alive?

But 'something' is not always good, or right, or successful.

And those feelings haunt him. They always will. Because he wants them to.

Because Bloodborne is when Mikael is 'himself' for the first time since the cell. It is the crystalization of the man he has become throughout his journey. Flawed, with holes to fill and healing to do, but whole as a character.

Mikael is, at this point in time, complete. He's passed the first tempering of his convictions.

And the story begins here.

Step 3: Create a Comic Book story.

There are certain tropes in comics I wanted to play with, and Volume 2 is the peak of that, in my opinion.

First and most obvious is the notion of 'Heroes Vs. Heroes.' It's almost law that any new character on the scene must battle established characters in order to determine relationship and power dynamics. Whose stronger, who has the moral advantage, etc.

The epilogue to Volume 1 is pretty much that.

Volume 2 is establishing a status quo. You know? The baseline of day-to-day that the Rogue gallery interrupts. I deliberately set up Volume 2 to be a 'Monster of the Week' sort of framework. While there were hints at a grander narrative, each section is an almost entirely self-contained story.

The first part, Emancipation, is the story of Mikael and his Family settling in. Not just on Earth but with each other. They are learning of their new dynamic and their new World. They are dipping their toes in the outside World, but almost wholly focused on their own plans.

The outside World, however, is still reeling.

Emancipation is the time when Mikael's position as an Out of Context problem is in full effect. He came to this World with certain preconceived notions and plans, and right away, both he and the people of Earth find their plans axed. They have to reach equilibrium.

Throughout all of this is the narrative backdrop of Superman and Batman and the impending death of the former.

This was my first time playing around with the theme of 'What is a hero?' It would remain one of the largest themes throughout the story, but this is the first time I present a definitive 'This is a hero!' type character.

Superman is unambiguously a hero, at least in this story. That doesn't mean he is without depth, but there is no doubt that he does what he believes is the 'right thing.'

And Mikael? He very much does not.

Between them is Diana. She is torn between a world familiar and foreign to her, friends she thought lost and the Family she has gained.

All three parties, Diana, Mikeal, and Superman, know that the latter is almost certainly going to die to Doomsday.

Superman, the hero, decides to face that death head-on to save others.

Mikael, the cowardly human, bides his time, willing to let others fight and die rather than risk his own Family until he is sure they can win.

Diana is the propelling force that changes things. She straddles the line between utilitarian like Mikael and heroic like Superman.

Diana makes a decision, a rash one, but the right one.

She fights.

I think, in any waifu catalogue story that wants to be more than porn or blank wish fulfillment, there needs to be a point where the 'Waifus' stand up to the MC.

It doesn't necessarily matter who is right in that argument. What matters is that these characters, even if they are in love, are still their own people. They have their own lines they won't cross and their own battles they'll fight, with or without the MC.

Emancipation is all sides learning of the new status quo while Furlough is all sides learning how to play nice with each other.

Mikael and his wives are learning to compromise while he learns to work with the people of this World. This also begins what I think of as the beginning of connections. Mikael, slowly and hesitantly, starts to reach out beyond his immediate Family.

And that leads to some great interactions with this World. Whether it's his interview, his time with the Titans, or his connection with Batman. All of these moments are important, not just for the end of the book, but also to tether Mikael to a 'real world,' one not made up solely of people he loves.

And then the climax of the arc.

I will say, of all the 'battles' of Rapturous Rhapsody, Mikael's mental battle of plans with Trigon was my favourite to write. It also represents the moment when the 'heroes' of the Family put their trust in Mikael's way of doing things while he starts to act overtly heroic. (Don't let him hear you say that.)

As I said, Volume 2 Part 2 is when the characters compromise.

Part 3, Probation, is about 'day-to-day life.'

One of the more controversial Arcs, the suicide squad, arose from two questions I posed myself.

How do I show the day-to-day life of not just the Family but also the people of this World?

And:

What is this World doing to try to stop/hinder/understand Mikael and his Family?

I've already explained much of my thought process for those chapters in those chapters themselves, so you can go read it there, but I will say this marks the first time Darkseid succeeds in a plan against Mikael.

In case anyone was wondering, he managed to get the animals off the Island because he is looking through the eyes of the Suicide Squad, thus can use a Boom Tube to create a portal from the outside in to their position. The Squad themselves cannot escape because of Mikael's preparations, but the animals of his Island are not marked.

They wouldn't be able to pass the Jewel themselves, even with help from the outside, but the Boom Tube passes that hurdle. It took a few tries before Darkseid succeeded, and many of the 'invaders' were secretly controlled by him, but I chose to show only the successful mission.

Part 3 also introduced the Parliaments of Earth.

I had known from the get-go that I wanted to use them in some way for Mikael's growth. They, like the Phoenix Force, represent 'Life' in their own universes, and I wanted that to be a factor in who and what Mikael would eventually become.

To be honest, until the very end, I was vacillating on whether Mikael would merge with the Phoenix, the Parliaments or both. While I knew I eventually wanted him to be 'free' of them, I struggled to figure out the mechanics of how it would happen.

It was actually as I was writing the 'talk' with The Green in the last arc that I recognized the potential of what I had already established.

Avatars of the Parliaments are influenced by their element but also influence the elements in turn. Mikael will never accept the former, but he would accept the latter.

The Parliaments themselves wouldn't care, as they just want to continue. They have no sense of 'self' to worry about. Hell, they wouldn't have cared if Darkseid took over Earth if he let them

continue to grow and thrive. Why would they care who ruled and who didn't?

So, yes, for all its controversial parts, I still consider Volume 2 part 3 to be one of the most important parts of the story as a whole. It sets up characters, plots, and threads that shape the rest of the narrative.

Also, I love writing Medea the Cat(?).

This leads to Volume 2, Part 4, Tribunal.

Let's see, I've already gone over the in-story reasons for the character's actions, so I'll skip it here.

Instead, let me go into the reasons for my choices from an author's perspective.

First off, I wanted to finish Volume 2 with a very clear message: 'Someone is doing this!'

It was almost a James Moriarty-esque situation. There are individual crimes with individual bad guys, but it all feeds back into a grander plan that the characters do not understand.

Secondly, I wanted to give as many of the 'waifu's' as possible a moment to shine. While Rapturous Rhapsody is, at its core, Mikael's journey, I wanted to give everyone a highlight moment.

Mikael's views mirror mine. (Obviously, he's partly based on me.) I hate damsels in distress and I wanted to make sure every one of these women had a moment to prove they were not that. They are each capable of self-sufficiency and are certified badasses in their own way.

I especially loved being able to get creative with their powers. Either their Elements, Semblances, or something that made a reader sit up and go, 'wow, they are all broken.'

Robin's, in particular, I am proudest of.

Taking her concept of 'flowers' to the extreme, she is the sole member of the Family that Darkseid would never have been able to kill.

Out of the entire Family, before Mikael's ascension, Nico Robin was the only one who was truly immortal.

Part 4 is the first time since landing on Earth that Mikael really feels challenged. Not a challenge from the gods but a challenge to his way of life.

Sure, he's achieved a happily ever after, but now he realizes that he has to fight for it. Not just 'comic book fight' but 'people are targeting me fight.'

He will always have to fight for it.

There will never be a time when he is not challenged, at least in his mind.

And he is reminded of the other option he knows he has.

At any point, he can choose to Free himself of 'himself.'

But he chooses not to, even if he is starting to get tired.

Compared to Bloodborne, or what comes later, it is only a small challenge to who he is and how he's chosen to live, but it is the first one in a while.

Which leads to Volume 3.

Part 1, Consequences, is the payoff for a lot of small storylines. Not just the hints of the Phoenix and Melina stepping into her own, but also the lesser acknowledged parts of comics, like the effect these cataclysmic battles have on day-to-day life.

I love taking these grand stories, these world-shaking plots, and zooming in.

We go from looking at the forest to looking at one particular blade of grass. It's a grounding, a sense of realism that is so often lacking in comics.

Worm is, unironically, great for that (at least early on).

I wanted to show with this part that, even after the battle is won and all lives that can be saved have been saved, the World still goes on.

Victory is not the end.

Next is part 2, Obsession

This is, in my opinion, when Darkseid and Mikael's plans are at their most directly confrontational. They are concocting plans, countering the other's plans, and playing off each other.

Mikael has better aides and meta knowledge, but Darkseid is more powerful and has the home-field advantage.

Mikael's one mistake, at least at this point, is underestimating the effect of Heartbreak. In his mind, the Phoenix Force is more important, whereas Darkseid is more conscious of Mikael because (at this point in time) he believes he is responsible for Heartbreak.

The X-men part of the story, with Madelyne Pryor and Baby-Cable was kind of a natural continuation of Sinister's experiments. I like to have characters inform plots whenever I can. Sinister has gained the Old Blood, but he is not a different person. He still wants to achieve his goal, so why not try and 'repurpose' a failed experiment.

And Darkseid would, of course, want to test Mikael's powers since he can't directly control him.

Only, he didn't expect Mikael to not actually fight more than a spar. Nor did he expect Mikael's meta knowledge to extend to being able to accurately lock on to Sinister as the true culprit right away.

So, Darkseid uses the opportunity to learn about the Old Blood while Mikael uses it to discover the extent of the infection. Poor little Sinister is caught in the middle. (please note the sarcasm.)

All while Darkseid's true target, one of the leaders of the largest galactic empires, is called to Earth to 'deal with the Phoenix Force.'

Gladiator is the bait on a hook, not only for every other space-faring race in the universe but also for his fellow New Gods, whom Darkseid knows raided a Shi'ar World recently looking

for traces of him.

Part 3, Dream, is the calm before the storm.

It is the unravelling of Mikael's dream, the illusion he has propped up. Despite all his new power and all the help he can now call upon, he is still just as helpless as he always was.

He can't stop the Old Blood for good. He is still forced to be a hunter, and slowly but surely, he is becoming more isolated. He still has his Family, but those connections he's tried to build have been cut one after another.

And it is unequivocally his fault. Without him, there'd be no Old Blood.

It is a grim reminder of his origins that, for all his power, Mikael is the same person who first appeared in Bloodborne.

He is so tired.

But there is light at the end of the tunnel. They discover the enemy's identity. Darkseid.

And a new Dream is born.

Defeat the big bad, the rival, and overcome the new Wall. Maybe even find an acceptable way to reach Tier 11 in the process.

After that, they can rebuild, and he can free those who are controlled and return to his happily ever after.

Which leads to the finale.

Volume 3, while separated into parts, is my attempt at a comic 'event' type story as a whole rather than the serialized monster of the week format of volume 2.

Throughout the entire volume, from start to end, Darkseid looms over the story from the background. He's a malevolent force, a shadow the characters chase but remains out of their reach. And they are not the only ones. Some, like Valeria, help the main cast, while others, like Odin and the Parliaments, oppose Darkseid but aren't necessarily on the same side.

Quite a few people have pointed out that I 'introduced' Darkseid late and didn't give him much screen time and that hurt his impact as a villain.

There is some truth to that.

I have been aware of him from the get-go, so I actually feel his actions and plans were drawn out, but to readers, it seems like he showed up only at the end to be 'the big bad,' and then the story stopped.

On the other hand, I never wanted Darkseid to be complex in anything but his plans. I wanted a simple villain to contrast with Mikael. That pureness, I think, is the key to Darkseid. He doesn't have a sympathetic backstory or complex motivation.

Darkseid wants to dominate, kill, and rule. That's it.

In short, Darkseid is a dick.

Evil because he is true to himself and nothing more.

I did want to show an aspect that is usually overlooked in comics, though. How smart he is.

Darkseid has plans within plans and, with the home field advantage, he should realistically never lose except for when the author needs him to.

So he didn't.

His plan went perfectly.

And Mikael lost.

I won't lie. A huge part of Volume 3's ending was structured in the way it was because of the feedback I received from the ending of Volume 2. Not the ending itself, I had always planed it that way, but the way I portrayed it.

Instead of going very granular, with individual battles and victories and defeats like I had in Volume 2, I decided to brush over all but the most essential conflicts for the story's sake.

And, in doing so, I feel I overdid it. In my efforts to keep things from dragging on, I feel like I missed a chance to give a few important moments the impact they deserved.

A few come to mind, such as Valeria turning against Melina or Glynda's fight with Strange and her students.

I also brushed over the days Mikael was healing, waiting for Emma's return. Looking back, I think that would have been the perfect time to really dig in to the daily horror of living in a bad-end world. If I had done so, I feel that the scene where the people of the World choose to fight would have had more impact.

Still, we reached the end.

As for the ending itself, I wanted to do a few things.

First, I always knew Mikael's 'Breath' would be the Fires of the First Flame.

For those not caught up on their Dark Souls Lore, the Fires are not just a representation of 'Life' and civilization but of disparity. Of choice. Between Light and Dark, Life and Death.

Before the First Flame, nothing changed. Nothing grew or died. It was only when the Age of Fire began that people could be free to individuate.

That representation, on top of his history with it, meant I could think of no better fire to qualify as 'Mikael.'

Medea has been playing with the idea of a similar system to Bonefires since Volume 1. It is the perfect way to counter the Company's use of the Warranty Plan, and it does not contain a curse of undead that came about because there is no true age of fire. It's just a powerful spell.

From the get-go, I knew I wanted to turn a 'Bad-End' into a 'Good-end.'

In comics, there are often worlds that end, where the heroes die or fail, and those worlds serve as origin stories for characters joining the main timeline.

Think 'Days of Future Past' or 'Dark Knight Metal.'

Those have always fascinated me because of their inherent dichotomy in their natures. They

are proof that heroes don't always win. Only those of the 'mainline' comics will eventually return to the status quo.

So, I wanted to play with that concept a bit. How do you turn a Bad End into a good one?

First is recognizing how much it would suck to live day-to-day life in a comic world with no power. So, do you remove powers? No, then all you are doing is levelling the playing field. That's not a good end; it's just our World.

So what do you do?

You give everyone the choice of what end do they want. Are they content to rest, or do they fight on, even if life is difficult?

That, I think, is the only good ending we can ever get. One we choose for ourselves.

Throughout the entirety of Rhapturous Rhapsody, I've tried to covey the dictionary of death (the end of life, not the character.) It is something to be feared, to run from.

Mikael's entire goal can be viewed as a struggle against death. Death of the mind from mind control or death of the 'self' through external alteration.

But death itself is just an ending. Not good. Not bad. It just is. It can be an end of hope, ambition, and dreams. But it is also the end of pain, despair, and suffering.

Mikael's entire life since the cell has been walking that line.

This brings me to the second thing I wanted to do with the ending: Mikael's conclusion.

Not in power, but in character.

Melina's death was his lowest point. Period.

When Emma dies, he has some hope of getting her back, whether through Warranty Plan or other tricks throughout the multiverse.

But Emma's loss forces Mikael to make the choice one final time.

It is his last test, the final tempering of the blade, the crucible he must pass through to be not just 'complete' but 'whole.'

So, once more, he must make the choice.

Does he give up his 'self' to gain the power to ensure he never feels this pain again? Why live if only to suffer? Because even if he truly lives forever, there will come a time when those he loves will leave him.

He will never be free of loss, of pain, of sorrow unless he 'Frees' himself.

Even after becoming 'Existence,' that remains true. Some day, his wives or someone else he loves will desire the peace of death. And he will let them go. He will give them that choice. Even if it hurts.

Giving in would be easy.

He's tired, worn down by everything. Everyone else in this World has given in to the bitter truth. Life doesn't have a purpose. Why can't he rest? Why must he always get back up?

But, once more, Mikael chooses to face his Wall.

He refuses to rest, refuses to give in to the inevitable fear, the sorrow, and the pain. Because if he does, he loses everything that comes with it.

The love, beauty, joy, and laughter.

He chooses to live.

And always will.

And that gives him the petty, pathetic, and all too human vindictive streak to fuck Darkseid over one last time.

Which is how he wins.

Mikael's story is finished before he ever becomes 'Existence' or defeats Darkseid.

That is why everything after that is the 'epilogue.'

The final thing I wanted from the ending was to completely negate the idea of a 'reset to normal.'

One thing I absolutely hate in comics is the bullshit surrounding continuity and retconning. I don't really have a problem with a multiverse or characters coming back to life, but the idea that 'this event never happened' pisses me off.

No. It happened.

The characters who died there are dead. Just because someone who looks like them is here doesn't mean that they are the same character.

We are made of our memories and our experiences. When a writer decides, 'Hmm, I don't like this story. It never happened.' it is, to me at least, them creating wholly new characters.

Which is fine.

I love alternate takes on familiar characters and stories. I read fanfiction, after all.

But don't try and pass that bullshit as 'what really happened.'

Mikael, at the end of RR, could have reset the World. He could have forcefully brought back everyone who died, rebuilt everything destroyed, and erased all memories of the event. Or he could have just gone back in time.

But he doesn't. Because doing so is no different than killing the people who experienced the event and replacing them with 'acceptable' versions.

Everyone has to live and die with the choices they make. That has been a consistent theme throughout this entire story. Whether it is the right choice, an easy choice, or an impossible choice, they need to live with it.

Now that I've followed RR from start to finish, I want to look back on a few topics that weren't covered.

First: Characters.

I won't go over all of them (I'd never finish), but a few really stand out.

Diana: I wanted her to be an opposite of Mikael in a lot of ways, a sort of representation of the women in his life and their difference from him. She is a capital H heroine. The quintessential hero, whereas Mikael is a civilian who gained power.

Diana is the last to fall in love. She shares the same element but almost wholly different view on it. It is her order that condemns him to burn for thousands of years, yet also ensures the Family will actually survive. Diana is the one who alerts him of Emma's plan.

Yet, for all that, I wanted to show her that feelings don't really care about that kind of impediment. It's not that 'opposites attract' but that even when we argue with a loved one, when we fight when we want to hit them, we still love them. We still see their admirable traits, those parts of them that draw us to them in the first place.

Mikael loves heroes. He loves that his wives can stand up to him. He loves that every single one of them is with him because they choose to be. He loves Diana.

Diana loves humanity. She loves the potential of them. She loves the ideals they can embody, the rising above lesser urges. She loves Mikael's convictions. She loves that, after everything he has been through, he has not let it turn him into a villain. She knows people like that. She knows how easy it would to give in to pain and vengence. Diana never wanted Mikael to be a hero.

Diana loves that Mikael has remained 'Mikael.'

Emma: Oh boy, where to start with this one.

First off, she is one of those parts that are a holdover from the short story, but she is one of the best ones. I think, if I had decided to change the decisions on the Waifu Catalogue choices, she would have been removed and the story would have been lesser for it.

While there is another 'villain' among those initial 10, Medea is a character that can work really well with Mikael. Emma Frost, on the other hand, is the only one of the initial 10 who would actively work against him, if only for her self-interest.

So, I was at a crossroads with her character. Do I use a very 'heroic' version of her (even her 'good' portrayals are very self-serving), or do I take it as a challenge?

I ended up doing a bit of both. I asked myself, 'If she really were to work with Mikael, would that be better for them both?'

Emma, in this book, is the single most die-hard Mikael simp to ever exist. Yet that does not change who she is. She still causes 'problems' because she is still Emma Frost (Don't let her hear you say that.) She thinks like Emma Frost. She acts like Emma Frost.

All that has changed is that Mikael is her #1 priority, instead of everything else. And even then, that stems from a selfish root, of feeling his Mad Love for her and the power he held.

If Diana is 'Opposition', then Emma was designed to be a 'tragic support.' Someone who works with Mikael, but both of their characters will forever keep them from seeing perfectly eye

to eye.

Which is a good thing.

Yes-men, or Yes-women as the case may be, are very boring. Both to write and in a relationship. Emma and Mikael might never see eye to eye, but that is the beauty of it. Even if they disagree on most things, both of them will support the other in every way they can. A different kind of love and relationship than any of the other wives.

... Looking at how much I've already written, I think I'll only lightly touch on the other characters.

The Family: I've already gone over how I wanted to give all of them at least one moment to shine and how I've tried to convey their own characters when I could.

The only thing I will also touch on is how much Rapturous Rhapsody is also about trying to give a 'Waifu Catalogue' story a somewhat realistic romantic dynamic (One that doesn't involve mind control, at least.) I wanted to convey the relationship (both romantic and not) between the women when I could to give a real sense that this is a family, not just 'women with Mikael.'

The Heroes: Giving a large amount of screen time to even a handful of heroes would have bloated the story even more than it is, so I chose a few to focus on. I've already covered Superman, but I do want to mention Batman a bit.

As a 'hero,' Batman is obviously one of the ones Mikael can identify with the best. Combined with Diana's friendship, he was a perfect connection for Mikael to form, representing the heroic community's relationship with the Family.

He is also very fun to write.

The World: I wanted the World to be a character in its own right. The nations, their leaders, the people living their daily lives, all of it. So little time is given to superhero worlds, most of the time, lost in the larger-than-life stories and characters.

I use Taylor for this, mostly. Some wondered if she would have some great, secret purpose in the finale. Some larger power than her seemingly simple (if useful) one.

No. Taylor Hebert was exactly as she appeared to be. Just another face in the crowd. A woman trying to get by in a world filled with people with powers. Not all powers are useful. 99% of them would be useless or hindrances rather than boons.

Those were some of my favourite parts of Worm, not when it got Grim-derp, but when the banality of life was so obvious.

Of course, hero fights cause traffic. Certainly, repairs will take a while. Insurance rates will increase. Small momentos are lost. Online friends will disappear, and you will never know what happened to them.

And the helplessness of it all will set in.

I tried to put myself in the mindset of someone living in the middle of an ongoing natural

disaster.

You might survive. You might not even be damaged. But for how long?

I think I wanted to show that everyone faces these struggles, not just heroes and villains.

But I think that wraps up the characters. (Or at least some of them. I do want to finish at some point, after all.)

Second: Themes.

Themes are important to me and, thus, important to my stories. I love stories that have something to say and can convey that message through their characters and plots.

I mentioned it earlier, but if there is one major theme of Rapturous Rhapsody, it is the juxtaposition of Life and Death.

Death is not bad. Death is rest. Death is peace. Whether you believe in an afterlife or not, death is the cessation of 'life.' It is an end. One that terrifies us, but we will meet no matter what. So we run from death, even as it will one day let us lay down and rest.

Life, on the other hand, is often terrible. Even ignoring the greater issues facing the World today, just day-to-day life wears us down. The constant effort to just get out of bed in the morning, the exaution we all face when a situation goes bad and we have to deal with it. Life is a struggle. Every second of every day, it is a battle.

Yet in life we find possibility. We chase hope, love, and laughter. It is only when we are alive that we find joy in company, in games, in comics, in silly wishfufillment stories.

The dead are at peace, but only the living can laugh.

Dark Souls, I think, is a great way of expressing that contradiction. If you look around the internet you can find plenty of people talking about how it helped with their depression.

I've never been clinically depressed myself, but I know people that have.

All of them, every single one, tell me how tired they are. Just living is exhausting.

Many cannot gain the strength to get out of bed in the morning. More than that, they don't see a point in doing so.

Why do anything when there is no point in life?

They've gone hollow.

I think that is why Dark Souls resonates so well, because everyone who plays it, who wakes up in that cell in the Undead Asylum, can be categorized into two catagories.

Those who listen to the rumours, the 'git gud' comments, and who don't believe in themselves. Those who, after losing over and over again, give up and never play again.

These are the hollows. Those who've lost the will to continue.

And then there are the others.

Those who, despite the challenge, despite the bad reputation and the frustration at constantly losing, choose to get back up and throw themselves at the Wall.

These are the Chosen Undead.

They are not chosen because they are special but because they choose to keep going.

They refuse to go hollow.

I want to clarify that I am not making a value judgemeng on playing and beating Dark Souls or not. I am perfectly aware that the genre is not for everyone.

Some people do not game for challenge but for escapism, role play, creativity, or any number of reasons. Nor do I think one should blindly throw themselves against any challenge they find. There are tons of games out there where 'difficulty' is used as an excuse for bad game design.

But Dark Souls is designed to be beaten by anyone. That is why it is such a good metaphor.

I suppose Rapturous Rhapsody can be considered a 'Dark Souls Fanfiction' because I tried to capture that essence with the story.

So, looking back, what would I change?

First off, I think I was too ambitious for a first work. There were too many story threads, characters, themes, and plots to juggle for the first story I completed and released.

Second, serialized releases. My complaints with serialization are numerous and documented, so I won't go into them.

I chose to set a specific deadline (Fridays, once a week) in order to force myself to work. I do most of my work under pressure and these consistent deadlines are a big reason I was able to maintain a consistent schedule.

But the story suffered for it.

I had less time to edit, I was constantly at the whim of any IRL bullshit I had to deal with, and I didn't have time to make sure everything remained consistent.

Going forward, I think I'll need to strike a balance in my future Fanfiction work. A consistent release date, but only starting to release it once I have enough chapters saved up to give me the time I need.

That has worked really well for On The Bench, my other story, and I think I'll keep it up in the future.

Finally, and my greatest mistake, was remaining beholden to the first short story that started this all. While the challenge of working around it is fun, it led to too many extraneous characters. The number of 'waifu's' could have been cut in half, and the story would have been better off for it. (No matter how much I love them all as characters.)

Not only that, but there were also too many power sets, worlds, and settings that would lessen the enjoyment of most people. Unless you are essentially me, you won't be familiar with all the Fandoms I used for this story.

If I were to rate this story:

As a story based on the Waifu Catalogue, 9 out of 10

As a fanfiction: 7 out of 10

As a story (compared to published works): 5 out of 10.

Final self-rating: 7.7 out of 10.

But that is just me. Some of you would rate it higher, and some lower. That's fine. We each enjoy different things in different ways. There is no one story everyone would love.

Certainly not this one.

Overall, I am pleased with what I created for my first story. Rapturous Rhapsody may not be perfect, but it is mine.

Even if we ignore OTB, RR still represents an enormous investment of time and effort.

762679 words (not counting ANs) over 675 days, averaging about 1130 words a day. This is not counting time editing or cut content.

And this was all while working a full-time job, losing it (twice), finding new jobs, moving four times, and a few natural disasters along the way.

Sometimes, I look at the numbers, do a bit of math, and bask in the surreality of it all.

For those interested, here is some crunchy data.

Questionable Questing: At the time of writing, the final chapter has 550 likes.

(QQ doesn't give any other metrics that I am aware of, so I am only going to numbers that I can verify. There are probably plenty of readers who don't Like, which is fine, they just aren't included in my calculation.)

Sufficient Velocity: 231 watchers.

Royal Road: 206 followers.

Scribble Hub: 793 readers.

Fanfiction net: 1103 Followers

Archive of Our Own: 1103 Kudos (a funny coincidence with FF)

Webnovel: 389 readers (Of the finale)

4375 verified readers.

While I know this number doesn't account for those who dropped off and any overlapping readers between sites, it also doesn't account for those who shadow read, so I'll just use it as an educated estimate.

Assuming all my readers read about 300 wpm (on the higher ends of reading speed, but you all are awesome, so I'll take it), that means that between all sites, there were around 1,312,500 minutes spent reading Rapturous Rhapsody.

21,875 hours.

911.46 days.

2.5 fucking years!

I have, through a shitty waifu catalogue fanfiction, sucked up 2.5 years of the human race.

My evil plan is complete, and there's nothing you can do about it!

MWAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

In all seriousness, you guys are awesome. I've improved a lot over the years, but I still have a long way to go. I want to shout out a few of my readers here.

First: Prolu on QQ. The first comment I ever received.

Second: Those who PM me. I won't share their names, since it was private, but you know who you are. I often go to those conversations and well wishes when I found myself loosing motivation.

Third: Mr. Dyeus and ***ravelt (that's me!)*** *on QQ for their images and Epub links for the books, respectivly. Ravelt has already created a full epub of RR for those who want to download it and read offline.*

Fourth: Neo_Infinity, who made an effort to comment on almost every chapter on almost every site I posed on.

Fifth: Himera and TheCenterAct on QQ for their omakes.

Sixth: Xagnam, also on QQ, who turned Ranni's speech in the Epilogue of volume one into an audio track using an AI version of her voice.

Finally: To everyone who has liked, commented, followed, or generally engaged with Rapturous Rhapsody. I was able to finish this story because I knew you were out there and your every comment helped me improve and push over any Wall.

We've had our ups and downs. Good times and bad.

We all face our Walls every day, and will continue to do so every day until we can rest.

I hope this rapturous rhapsody, this story with its rise and falls, has engaged, entertained, and enraptured you, even if only for a moment.

To everyone, I hope you face the challenges of your life with a laugh, a pun, and a middle finger.

Don't you dare go hollow!